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NOVEMBER 2008

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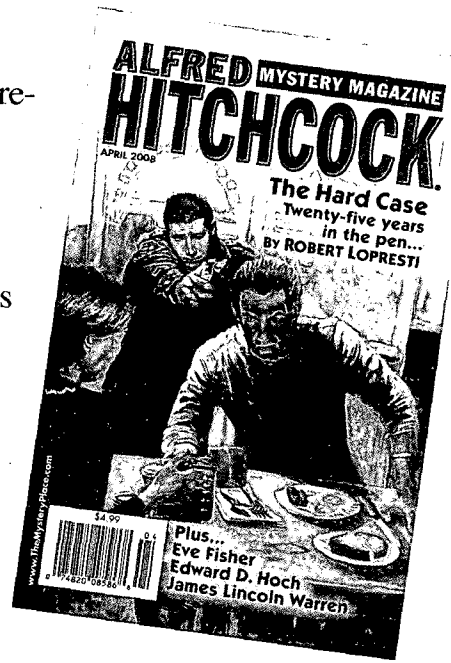

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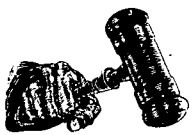

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Art by Laurie Harden

TROUBLE IN MIND

by John Harvey

Kiley smoothed the page across his desk and read it again: A survey conducted by Littlewood Pools had concluded that of all ninety-two Premiership and Football League soccer teams, the one most likely to cause its supporters severe stress was Notts County. Notts County! Sitting snug, the last time Kiley had looked, near the midpoint of the League Two table and in immediate danger neither of relegation nor the nail-biting possibilities of promotion via the play-offs. Whereas Charlton Athletic, in whose colours Kiley had turned out towards the end of his short and less than illustrious career, were just one place from the bottom of the Premiership, with only four wins out of a possible twenty-two. Not only that, despite having sacked two successive managers before Christmas, this Saturday just past they had been bundled out of the FA Cup by Nottingham Forest, who had comprehensively stuffed them at the City ground, two-nil.

Stress? Stress didn't even begin to come close.

Kiley looked at the clock.

12:09.

Too late for morning coffee, too early for lunch. From his office

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window he could see the traffic edging in both directions, a pair of red 134 buses nuzzling up to one another as they prepared to run the gauntlet of Kentish Town Road on their way west towards the city centre, the slow progress of a council recycling lorry holding up those drivers who were heading—God help them—for the Archway roundabout and thence all points north.

His in-tray held a bill from the local processing lab, a begging letter from the Royal National Lifeboat Institution, and a polite reminder from HM Revenue & Customs that the final deadline for filing his tax return was the thirty-first of January—for more details about charges and penalties, see the enclosed leaflet SA352.

Hailed as one of the U.K.'s greatest living crime writers, Cartier Diamond Dagger recipient John Harvey will be honored in Baltimore this fall as the International Guest of Honor of the Bouchercon Mystery Convention. He joins us with a story in which the popular hero of 11 of his novels, Charlie Resnick, joins forces with P.I. Jack Kiley, the protagonist of numerous Harvey short stories. Just out: a new Resnick novel, *Cold in Hand* (Harcourt). ¶

His pending file, had he possessed such a thing, would have held details of a course in advanced DNA analysis he'd half-considered after a severe overdose of *CSI*; a letter, hand-written, from a Muswell Hill housewife—a rare, but not extinct breed—wanting to know what Kiley would charge to find out if her husband was slipping around with his office junior—as if—and a second letter, crisply typed on headed notepaper, offering employment in a prestigious security firm run by two former colleagues from the Met. Attractive in its way, but Kiley couldn't see himself happily touching his peaked cap to every 4x4 driver checking out of a private estate in Totteridge and Whetstone on the way to collect Julian and Liberty from private school or indulge in a little gentle shopping at Brent Cross.

Early or not, he thought he'd go to lunch.

The Cook Shop was on the corner of Fortess Road and Raveley Street, a godsend to someone like Kiley who appreciated good, strong coffee or a tasty soup-and-sandwich combo, and which, apart from term-time mornings, when it tended to be hysterical with young mums from the local primary school, was pretty well guaranteed to be restful and uncrowded—the owner's abiding penchant for Virgin FM Radio aside.

"The usual?" Andrew said, turning towards the coffee machine as Kiley entered.

"Soup, I think," Kiley said.

Eyebrow raised, Andrew glanced towards the clock. "Suit yourself."

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Today it was mushroom and potato, helped along with a few chunks of pale rye bread. Someone had left a newspaper behind and Kiley leafed through it as he ate. Former Labour Education Minister takes her child out of the state system because his needs will be better served elsewhere. Greater transparency urged in NHS. Unseasonably warm weather along the eastern seaboard of the United States. Famous celebrity Kiley had barely heard of walks out of *Big Brother* house in high dudgeon.

An item on the news page caught his eye, down near the bottom of page six. ***Roadside Bomb Kills British Soldier on Basra Patrol***. . . . *The death of the soldier, whose name was not immediately released, brings the number of British military fatalities in Iraq, since the invasion of 2003, to 130.*

Iraq, Afghanistan—maybe some day soon, Iran.

Kiley pushed the paper aside, used his last piece of bread to wipe around the inside of the bowl, slipped some coins onto the counter, and walked out into the street. Not sunbathing weather exactly, but mild for the time of year. The few greyish clouds moving slowly across the sky didn't seem to threaten rain. When he got back to his office, Jennie was sitting on the stairs; he didn't recognise her straight off, and when he did he couldn't immediately recall her name.

"You don't remember me, do you?"

"Of course I do."

"Really?" A smile crinkled the skin around her grey-green eyes and he knew her then.

"Jennie," he said. "Jennie Calder."

Her hair, grown back to shoulder-length, was the same reddish shade as before.

Jennie's smile broadened. "You do remember."

The last time Kiley had seen her she had been standing, newly crop-haired, cigarette in hand, outside a massage parlour on Crouch End Hill, ready to go to work. Two years back, give or take.

"How's your little girl?"

"Alice? Not so little."

"I suppose not."

"She's at school. Nursery."

Kiley nodded. Alice had been clinging to her mother, screaming, wide-eyed, when he had last seen her, watching as Kiley set about the two men who'd been sent by Jennie's former partner to terrorise them, mother and daughter both. Armed with a length of two-by-four and a sense of righteous indignation, he had struck hard first and left the questions for later. Some men, he'd learned, you could best reason with when they were on their knees.

"How did you find me?" he asked.

"Yellow pages." Jennie grinned. "Let my fingers do the walking."

She was what, Kiley wondered, early thirties? No more. Careful

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makeup, more careful than before; slimmer, too: black trousers with a flare and a grey-and-white top beneath a long burgundy cardigan, left unfastened.

"You'd best come in."

The main room of the second-floor flat served as living room and office both: a wooden desk rescued from a skip pushed into service by the window; a swivel chair, secondhand, bought cheap from the office suppliers on Brecknock Road; a metal shelf unit and filing cabinet he'd ferried over from his previous quarters in Belsize Park. For comfort, there was an easy chair that had long since shaped itself around him. A few books, directories; computer, fax, and answer phone. A Bose radio/CD player with an eclectic selection of music alongside: Ronnie Lane, Martha Redbone, Mose Allison, Cannonball Adderley, the new Bob Dylan, old Rolling Stones.

One door led into a small kitchen, another into a shower room and lavatory and, beyond that, a bedroom which took, just, a four-foot bed, a chest of drawers, and a metal rail from which he hung his clothes.

Home, of a kind.

"You haven't been here long," Jennie said.

"Observation, or have you been asking around?"

Jennie smiled. "I spoke to the bloke in the charity shop downstairs."

"A couple of months," Kiley said. "The rent in the other place . . ." He shrugged. "Can I get you something? Tea? Coffee? I think there's some juice."

She shook her head. "No, I'm fine."

"This isn't a social call."

"Not exactly."

Kiley sat on one corner of his desk and waved Jennie towards the easy chair. "Fire away."

A heavy lorry went past outside, heading for the Great North Road, and the windows shook. The Great North Road, Kiley thought, when had he last heard someone call it that? Seven years in the Met, four in uniform, the remainder in plain clothes; two years of professional soccer and the rest spent scuffling a living as some kind of private investigator. All the while living here or hereabouts. The Great North Road—maybe it was time he took it himself. He'd been in that part of London for too long.

"This woman," Jennie said, "Mary. Mary Anderson. Lives near me. The flats, you know. She used to look after Alice before she started nursery. Just mornings. Alice loved her. Still does. Calls her Gran. She's got this son, Terry. In the army. Queen's Royal something-or-other, I think it is."

"Lancers," Kiley offered.

"That's it. Queen's Royal Lancers. They were out in Iraq. Till—

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what?—a month ago, something like that. End of last week, he should have gone back."

"Iraq?"

"I don't know. Yes, I think so. But not, you know, straight off."

"Report to the barracks first."

Jennie nodded. "Yes."

"And that's what he didn't do?"

She nodded again.

"AWOL."

Jennie blinked.

"Absent without leave."

"Yes."

"Does she know where he is? His mum."

"All this last week he was staying with her, her flat. Thursday morning, that's when he was due to go back. All his kit there ready in the hall, wearing the uniform she'd ironed for him the night before. He just didn't go. Stood there, not saying anything. Ages, Mary said. Hours. Then he went back into the spare room, where he'd been sleeping and just sat there, staring at the wall. Mary, she had to go out later, mid morning, not long, just to the shops. When she got back, he'd gone."

"She's no idea where?"

"No. There was no note, nothing. First, of course, she thought he'd changed his mind. Gone back after all. Then she saw all his stuff, his bag and that, all dumped down beside the bed. 'Cept his uniform. He'd kept his uniform. And his gun."

Kiley looked at her sharply.

"Mary had seen it, this rifle. Seen him cleaning it. She searched through everything but it wasn't there. He must have took it with him."

"She's phoned the barracks to make sure . . ."

"They phoned her. When he didn't show. They'd got her number, next of kin. She did her best to put them off, told them he'd been taken ill. Promised to get back in touch." Jennie shook her head. "She's worried sick."

"He's what? Twenty? Twenty-one?"

Jennie shook her head. "No, that's it. He's not some kid. Thirty-five if he's a day. Sergeant, too. The army, it's a career for him. Mary says it's the only thing he's ever wanted to do."

"All the more reason to think he'll turn up eventually. Come to his senses."

Jennie was twisting a silver ring round and round on her little finger. "She said, Mary, before this happened, he'd been acting strange."

"In what way?"

"You'd best ask her."

"Look, I didn't say . . ."

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"Just talk to her . . ."
"What for?"
"Jack . . ."
"What?"
"Talk to her, come on. What's the harm?"

Kiley sighed and eased his chair back from the desk. The man in the charity shop below was sorting through his collection of vinyl. The strains of some group Kiley vaguely remembered from his childhood filtered up through the board. The Easybeats? The Honeycombs? He could see why people would want to get rid of the stuff, but not why anyone would want to buy it again—not even for charity.

Jennie was still looking at him.

"How did you get here?" Kiley asked. "Drive?"

"Walked. Suicide Bridge."

Kiley reached for the phone. "Let's not tempt fate twice. I'll get a cab."

When the council named the roads on the estate after streets in New Orleans they couldn't have known about Hurricane Katrina or its aftermath. Nonetheless, following Jennie through the dog shit and debris and up onto the concrete walkway, Kiley heard inside his head not the booming hip-hop bass or the occasional metallic shrill of electro-funk that filtered here and there through the open windows, but Dylan's parched voice singing "The Levee's Gonna Break."

Mary Anderson's flat was in the same block as Jennie's but two storeys higher, coping missing at irregular intervals from the balcony, the adjacent property boarded up. A rubber mat outside the front door read *Welcome*, the area immediately around swept and cleaned that morning, possibly scrubbed. A small vase of plastic flowers was visible through the kitchen window.

Mary Anderson herself was no more than five-three or -four and slightly built, her neat grey hair and flowered apron making her look older than she probably was.

"This is Jack Kiley," Jennie said. "The man I spoke to you about, remember? He's going to help find Terry."

Kiley shot her a look which she ignored.

"Of course," Mary said. "Come in." She held out her hand. "Jennie, you know where to go, love. I'll just pop the kettle on." Despite the cheeriness in her voice, there were tears ready at the corners of her eyes.

They sat in the lavender living-room, cups of tea none of them really wanted in their hands, doing their best not to stare at the pictures of Terry Anderson that lined the walls. Terry in the park somewhere, three or four, pointing at the camera with a plastic gun; a school photograph in faded colour, tie askew; Terry and his

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dad on a shingle beach with bat and ball; a young teenager in cadet uniform, smart on parade. Others, older, head up and shoulders back, a different uniform, recognisable still as the little lad with the plastic gun. Bang, bang, you're dead.

On the mantelpiece, in a silver frame, was a carefully posed shot of Terry on his wedding day—in uniform again and with a tallish brunette in white hanging on his arm, her eyes bright and hopeful, confetti in her hair. Arranged at either side were pictures of two young children, boy and girl, Terry's own children presumably, Mary's grandchildren.

Jennie's cup rattled against its saucer, the small noise loud in the otherwise silent room.

"You've heard nothing from him?" Kiley said.

"Nothing."

"Not since Thursday?"

"Not a thing."

"And you've no idea . . . ?"

She was already shaking her head.

"His family . . ." Kiley began, a nod towards the photographs.

"They separated, split up, eighteen months ago. Just after young Keiron's fifth birthday. That's him there. And Billie. I always thought it a funny name for a girl, not quite right, but she insisted . . ."

"Could he have gone there? To see them?"

"Him and Rebecca, they've scarce spoken. Not since it happened."

"Even so . . ."

"He's not allowed. Not allowed. It makes my blood boil. His own children and the only time he gets to see them it's an hour in some poky little room with Social Services outside the bloody door." Her voice wobbled and Kiley thought she was going to break down and surrender to tears, but she rallied and her fingers tightened into fists, clenched in her lap.

"You've been in touch all the same?" Kiley said. "With Rebecca, is it? To be certain."

"I have not."

"But . . ."

"Terry'd not have gone there. Not to her. A clean break, that's what she said. Better for the children. Easier all round." She sniffed. "Better for the children. Cutting them off from their own father. It's not natural."

She looked at him sternly, as if defying him to say she was wrong.

"How about the children?" Kiley asked. "Do you get to see them at all?"

"Just once since she moved away. This Christmas past. They were staying with her parents, Hertfordshire somewhere. Her parents, that's different. That's all right." Anger made her voice tremble. " 'We can't stop long,' she said, Rebecca, almost before I could close

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the door. And then she sat there where you are now, going on and on about how her parents were helping her with the rent on a new house and how they were all making a fresh start and she'd be going back to college now that she'd arranged day care. And the children sitting on the floor all the time, too scared to speak, poor lambs. Threatened with the Lord knows what, I dare say, if they weren't on their best behaviour. Little Billie, she came up to me just as they were going, and whispered, 'I love you, Gran,' and I hugged her and said, 'I love you, too. Both of you.' And then she hustled them out the door."

Kiley reached his cup from the floor. "Terry, he knows where her parents live? Hertfordshire, you said."

"I suppose he might."

"You don't think Rebecca and the children might still be there?"

"I don't think so."

"All the same, if you had an address . . ."

"I should have it somewhere."

"Later will do."

"No trouble, I'll get it now."

"Let me," Jennie said.

With a small sigh, Mary pushed herself up from the chair. "I'm not an invalid yet, you know."

She came back with a small diary, a number of addresses pencilled into the back in a shaky hand. "There, that's them. Harpenden."

Kiley nodded. "And this," he said, pointing, "that's where Rebecca lives now?"

A brief nod. West Bridgford, Nottingham. He doubted if Rebecca had joined the ranks of disheartened County supporters, all the same.

"Thanks," he said, finishing copying the details into his notebook and passing back the diary.

"A waste of time, though," Mary said, defiantly. "That's not where he'll be."

Kiley nodded. Why was it mothers insisted on knowing their sons better than anyone, evidence to the contrary? He remembered his own mother—"Jack, I know you better than you know yourself." Occasionally, she'd been right; more often than not so wide of the mark it had driven him into a frenzy.

His gaze turned to the pictures on the wall. "Terry's father . . ."

"Cancer," Mary said. "Four years ago this March." She gave a slow shake of the head. "At least he didn't live to see this."

After a moment, Jennie got to her feet. "I'll make a fresh pot of tea."

Further along the balcony a door slammed, followed by the sounds of a small dog, excited, yelping, and children's high-pitched voices; from somewhere else the whine of a drill, someone's television, voices raised in anger.

Kiley leaned forward, the movement focussing Mary's attention. "Jennie said your son had been acting, well, a bit strangely . . ."

He waited. The older woman plaited her fingers slowly in and

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out, while, out of sight, Jennie busied herself in the kitchen.

"He couldn't sleep," she said eventually. "All the time he was here, I don't think he had one decent night's sleep. I'd get up sometimes to go to the lavatory, it didn't matter what time, and he'd be sitting there, in the dark, or standing over by the window, staring down. And then once, the one time he wasn't here, I was, well, surprised. Pleased. That he was sleeping at last. I tiptoed over and eased open the door to his room, just a crack. Wanted to see him, peaceful." Her fingers stilled, then tightened. "He was cross-legged on top of the bed, stark naked, staring. Staring right at me. As if, somehow, he'd been waiting. And that gun of his, his rifle, he had it right there with him. Pointing. I shut the door as fast as I could. I might have screamed or shouted, I don't know. I just stood there, leaning back, my eyes shut tight. I couldn't move. And my heart, I could feel my heart, here, thumping hard against my chest."

Slowly, she released her hands and smoothed her apron along her lap. Jennie was standing in the doorway, silent, listening.

"I don't know how long I stayed there. Ages, it seemed. Then I went back to my room. I didn't know what else to do. I lay down but, of course, I couldn't sleep, just tossing and turning. And when I asked him, in the morning, what kind of a night he'd had, he just smiled and said, 'All right, Mum, you know. Not too bad. Not too bad at all.' And drank his tea."

Jennie stepped forward and rested her hands on the older woman's shoulders.

"You will find him, won't you?" Mary said. "You'll try. Before he does something. Before something happens."

What was he supposed to say?

"I can't pay very much, you know. But I will, what I can." She rummaged round in her bag. "Here. Here's twenty pounds left over from my pension. I can give you more later, of course."

Kiley took ten and gave her the other ten back.

"You're sure?"

"Sure."

"Bless you."

"Terry," Jennie said. "What do you think?"

They were walking along the disused railway line that ran east from Crouch Hill towards Finsbury Park, grassed over now to make an urban footpath, the grass itself giving way to mud and gravel, the sides a dumping ground for broken bicycles and bundles of free newspapers no one could be bothered to deliver.

"I think he's taken a lot of stress," Kiley said. "Seen things most of us wouldn't even like to consider. But if he stays away there's always the risk of arrest, dishonourable discharge. Even prison. My best guess, he'll get himself to a doctor before it's too late, take whatever time he needs, report back with a medical certificate and

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a cartload of pills. That way, with any luck, he might even hang on to his pension."

"And if none of that happens?"

A blackbird startled up from the undergrowth to their left and settled again on the branches of a bush a little further along.

"People go missing all the time."

"People with guns?"

Kiley shortened his stride. "I'll go out to Harpenden first, make sure they're not still there. Terry could have been in touch, doing the same thing."

"I met her once," Jennie said. "Rebecca." She made a face. "Sour as four-day-old milk."

Kiley grinned. They walked on, saying little, just comfortable enough in each other's company without feeling really at ease, uncertain how far to keep walking, when to stop and turn back.

The house was to the north of the town, take a left past the golf club and keep on going; find yourself in Batford, you've gone too far. Of course, he could have done the whole thing on the phone, but in these days of so much cold calling, conversations out of the blue were less than welcome. And Kiley was attuned to sniffing around; accustomed, where possible, to seeing the whites of their eyes. How else could you hope to tell if people were lying?

The house sat back, smug, behind a few straggly poplars and a lawn with too much moss in it for its own good. A mud-splashed four-wheel drive sat off to one side, the space in front of the double garage taken up by a fair-sized boat secured to a trailer. How far, in God's name, Kiley wondered, were they from the sea?

The doorbell played something that sounded to Kiley as if it might be by Puccini, but if he were expecting the door itself to be opened by a Filipino maid in a starched uniform, or even a grim-faced au pair, he was mistaken. The woman appraising him was clearly the lady of the house herself, a fit-looking fiftyish with a fine tan and her hair swept up into what Kiley thought might be called a French roll—or was that twist? She was wearing cream trousers, snug at the hips, and a grey marl sweater with a high collar. There were rings on most of her fingers.

"Mr. Kiley?"

Kiley nodded.

"You're very prompt."

If he were a dog, Kiley thought, she would be offering him a little treat for being good. Instead she held out her hand.

"Christina Hadfield."

Beneath the smoothness of her skin, her grip was sure and firm.

"Please come in. I'm afraid my husband's not here. Some business or other."

As he followed her through a square hallway busy with Barbour

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jackets, green Wellingtons, and walking boots, the lines from one of his favourite Mose Allison songs came to mind.

I know her daddy got some money
I can tell by the way she walks

The room they went into sported two oversized settees and a small convention of easy chairs and you could have slotted in most of Mary Anderson's flat with space to spare. High windows looked out into the garden, where someone, out of sight, was whistling softly as he—or she—tidied away the leaves. Presumably not Mr. H.

Photographs of the two grandchildren, more recent than those on Mary Anderson's wall, stood, silver-framed, on the closed lid of a small piano.

"They're adorable," she said, following his stare. "Perfectly sweet. And well-behaved. Which is more than you can say for the majority of children nowadays." She pursed her lips together. "Discipline, in our society, I'm afraid, has become a dirty word."

"How long did they stay?" Kiley asked.

"A little over a week. Long enough to help undress the tree, take down the decorations." Christina Hadfield smiled. "Twelfth Night. Another old tradition gone begging."

"Terry, their father, he was home on leave while they were here."

"If you say so."

"He didn't make any kind of contact?"

"Certainly not."

"No phone calls, no . . ."

"He knows better than to do that after what happened."

"What did happen?"

"When Rebecca first said she was leaving him he refused to believe her. And then when he did, he became violent."

"He hit her?"

"He threatened to. Threatened her and the children with all manner of things. She called in the police."

"He was back in England then, when she told him?"

"My daughter is not a coward, Mr. Kiley, whatever else. Foolish, I grant you. Slow to acknowledge her mistakes." Reaching down towards the low table beside her chair, she offered Kiley a cigarette and when he shook his head, lit one for herself, holding down the smoke before letting it drift up towards the ceiling. "What possessed her to marry that man I was always at a loss to understand, and unfortunately, circumstances proved my reservations correct. It was a mismatch from the start. And a shame it took the best part of four years in noncommissioned quarters—bad plumbing and condensation streaming down the walls—to bring her to her senses."

"That's why she left him? For a better class of accommodation?"

Christina Hadfield's mouth tightened. "She left him because she wanted a better life for her children. As any mother would."

"His children, too, surely?"

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"Is that what you're here for? To be his apologist? To plead his cause?"

"I explained when I called . . ."

"What you gave me to understand on the telephone was that the unfortunate man was having some kind of a breakdown. To the extent that he might do himself some harm."

"I think it's possible. I'd like to find him before anything like that happens."

"In this, you're acting for his mother?"

"Yes."

"Poor woman." Smoke drifted from the corners of her mouth. "After speaking to you, I telephoned Rebecca. As I suspected, she's heard nothing from him. Certainly not recently."

"I see." Kiley got to his feet. Whoever had been whistling while they worked outside had fallen silent. Christina Hadfield's gaze was unwavering. What must it be like, Kiley thought, to entertain so little doubt? He took a card from his pocket and set it on the table. "Should Terry get in touch or should your daughter hear from him . . . unlikely as that might be."

No call to shake hands again at the door. She stood for a few moments, arms folded, watching him go, making good and sure he left the premises.

Was it the fact that his grandfather—his father's father—had been an engine driver that left Kiley so susceptible to trains? The old man—that was how he had always seemed to Kiley, though he could not have been a good deal older than Kiley himself was now—had worked on the old London and Midland Railway, the LMS, and, later, the LNER. Express trains to Leeds and Newcastle, smuts forever blackening his face and hair. Kiley could see him, home at the end of a lengthy shift, standing by the range in their small kitchen, sipping Camp coffee from the saucer. Rarely speaking.

Now, Kiley, who didn't own a car, and hired one from the local pay-as-you-go schemes when necessary, travelled by train whenever possible. A window seat in the quiet coach, a book to read, his CD Walkman turned low.

His relationship with Kate, a freelance journalist whom he had met when working security at an Iranian film festival on the South Bank and who, after some eighteen months, had cast him aside in favour of an earnest video installation artist, had left him, a sore heart and a taste for wine beyond his income aside, with a thing for reading. Some of the stuff that Kate had off-loaded on him he couldn't handle—Philip Roth, Zadie Smith, Ian McEwan—while others—Graham Greene, the Chandlers she'd given him as a half-assed joke about his profession, Annie Proulx—he'd taken to easily. Jim Harrison, he'd found on his own. The charity shop below his office, where he'd also discovered Hemingway—a dog-eared

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Penguin paperback of *To Have and Have Not* with the cover half torn away. Thomas McGuane.

What he was reading now was *The Man Who Liked Slow Tomatoes*, which, when he'd been scanning the shelves in the Kentish Town Oxfam, he'd first taken for yet another celebrity cookery book, but which had turned out to be an odd kind of crime novel about Mario Balzic, an ageing cop trying to hold things together in a dying industrial town in Pennsylvania. So far, more than half the book was in dialogue, a lot of which Kiley didn't fully understand, but somehow that didn't seem to matter.

For a few moments, he set the book aside and gazed out of the window. They were just north of Bedford, he guessed, the train gathering speed, and most of the low mist that had earlier been clinging to the hedgerows and rolling out across the sloping fields had disappeared. Off to the east, beyond a bank of threadbare trees, the sun was slowly breaking through. Turning down the Walkman a touch more, Mose Allison's trumpet quietly essaying "Trouble in Mind," he reopened his book and began chapter thirteen.

Nottingham station, when they arrived, was moderately busy, anonymous and slightly scruffy. The young Asian taxi driver seemed to know where Kiley wanted to go.

Travelling along London Road, he saw the floodlights of the County ground where he had once played. Had it been just the once? He thought it was. Then they were crossing the River Trent with the Forest pitch away to their left—the Brian Clough stand facing towards him—and, almost immediately, passing the high rows of white seats at one end of Trent Bridge, where, in a rare moment of recent glory, the English cricket team had sent the Australians packing.

It was a short street of smallish houses off the Melton Road, the number he was looking for at the far end on the left, a flat-fronted two-storey terraced house with only flaking paintwork to distinguish it from those on either side.

The bell didn't seem to be working, and after a couple of tries he knocked instead. A flier for the local pizza parlour was half-in half-out of the letterbox and, pulling it clear, he bent down and peered through. Nothing moved. When he called, "Hello!" his voice echoed tinnily back. Crouching there, eyes growing accustomed to the lack of light inside, he could just make out a toy dog, left stranded, splay-legged, in the middle of the narrow hall.

"I think they're away," a woman's voice said.

She was standing at the open doorway of the house alongside. Sixties, possibly older, spectacles, yellow duster in hand. The floral apron, Kiley thought, must be making a comeback.

"Most often I can hear the kiddies of a morning." She shook her head. "Not today. Quiet as the grave."

"You don't know where they might have gone?"

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"No idea, duck. You here for the meter or what?"

Kiley shook his head. "Friend of a friend. Just called round on the off chance, really."

The woman nodded.

"She didn't say anything to you?" Kiley asked. "About going away?"

"Not to me. Keeps herself to herself, mostly. Not unfriendly, but you know . . ."

"You didn't see her leaving? Her and the children?"

"Can't say as I did."

"And there hasn't been anybody else hanging round? A man?"

"Look, what is this? Are you the police or what?"

Kiley tried for a reassuring smile. "Nothing like that. Nothing to worry about."

"Well, you could try next-door the other side, they might know something. Or the fruit and veg shop back on Melton Road, I've seen her in there a time or two, chatting like."

Kiley thanked her and rang the next-door bell, but there was no one home. Between serving customers, the fruit and veg man was happy enough to pass the time of day, but could provide nothing in the way of useful information.

There was a narrow alley running down behind the houses, mostly taken up with green wheelie bins; a low gate gave access to a small, square yard. The rear curtains were pulled partway across.

Through the glass Kiley could see the remains of a sliced loaf, left unwrapped beside the sink; a tub of Flora with no lid; a pot of jam; a wedge of cheese, unwrapped. A child's coat lay bunched on the floor; a chair on its side by the far wall. Signs of unseemly haste.

The back door seemed not to be sitting snug in its frame. When Kiley applied pressure with the flat of his hand it gave a few millimetres, loose on its hinges, rattled, then stuck. No key, Kiley guessed, turned in the lock, but bolted at the top. A swift kick would have it open.

He hesitated, uncertain what to do.

Dave Prentiss's number was in his mobile; Prentiss, whom he'd worked with as a young DC when he'd first made it into plain clothes, and now in line for commander.

"Dave? Hi! It's Jack. Jack Kiley. . . . No, fine, thanks. Yes, grand. . . . Listen, Dave, you don't happen to know anyone up in Nottingham, do you? Someone you've worked with, maybe? Might be willing to give me the time of day."

Resnick had been up since before five, Lynn heading up some high-powered surveillance and needing to be in place to supervise the changeover, a major drugs supplier their target and kudos all round if they could pull it off. Resnick had made them both coffee, toast for himself, a rye loaf he'd picked up on the way home the day before, Lynn crunching her way through Dorset muesli with

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skimmed milk and a sliced banana.

"Why don't you go back to bed?" she'd said. "Get another couple of hours."

She'd kissed him at the door, the morning air cold against her cheek.

"You take care," he'd said.

"You too."

One of the cats wandered in from outside, sampled an early breakfast, and, despite the presence of a cat flap, miaowed to be let out again.

Instead of taking Lynn's advice, Resnick readied the smaller stovetop pot and made himself fresh coffee. Easing back the curtains in the living room, the outside still dark, he sat thumbing through the previous night's *Evening Post,* listening to Lester Young. Would he rather have been out there where Lynn was, the heart of the action, so called? Until recently, yes. Now, with possible retirement tapping him on the shoulder, he was less sure.

He was at his desk by eight, nevertheless, breaking the back of the paperwork before it broke him. Dave Prentiss rang a little after eleven and they passed a pleasant enough ten minutes, mostly mulling over old times. There was a lot of that these days, Resnick thought.

At a quarter to twelve, an officer called up from reception to say a Jack Kiley was there to see him. He got to his feet as Kiley entered, extending his hand.

"Jack."

"Detective Inspector."

"Charlie."

"Okay, then. Charlie."

The two men looked at one another. They were of similar height, but with Resnick a good stone and half heavier, the buttons on his blue shirt straining above his belt. Both still had a fullish head of hair, Resnick's darker and, if anything, a little thicker. Kiley, thinner-faced and a good half-dozen years younger, had a leaner, more athletic build. Resnick, in contrast, had the slightly weary air of a man who has spent too long sitting in the same comfortable chair. Balzic, Kiley thought for a moment, harking back to the book he'd been reading, Mario Balzic.

"Dave Prentiss said you might need a favour," Resnick said.

"You could call it that."

Resnick gestured towards a chair. "Better sit."

Kiley gave him a succinct version of events, what he knew, what he feared.

"You think they might be inside?"

"I think it's possible."

Resnick nodded. There had been a case not too long ago, north of the city. A man who'd discovered his wife was having an affair with

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a colleague and was planning to leave him; he had smothered two of the children with a pillow, smashed their mother's head open with a hammer, and left her bleeding on the kitchen floor. The police had found a third child hiding in the airing cupboard, limbs locked in fear.

There were other instances, too.

Almost a commonplace.

"You say the back door's only bolted?"

"So it seems."

"You didn't go in yourself?"

"I thought about it. Thought it might not be such a great idea."

Resnick considered, then reached towards the phone. "I'll organise a car."

"This could be a wild-goose chase," Kiley said as they were descending the stairs.

"Let's hope, eh?"

The driver was fresh-faced, carrot-haired, barely out of training. They're not only getting younger, Kiley thought, this one can only just see over the top of the steering wheel.

In the back of the car, Resnick was studying Kiley intently. "Charlton Athletic, wasn't it?" he said eventually.

Grinning, Kiley nodded.

"Cup game down at Meadow Lane," Resnick said.

Another nod.

"90/91."

"Yes."

"A good season for us."

"You had a good team."

"Tommy Johnson."

"Mark Draper."

Resnick smiled, remembering.

"Good Cup year for you, wasn't it?"

"Through to the sixth round. Spurs beat us 2-1 at White Hart Lane."

"We should've stopped you sooner."

"You had your chances."

Kiley looked out through the window. Off licence. Estate agent. Delicatessen. He had spent most of the game on the bench and only been sent on for the last fifteen minutes. Before he could adjust to the pace, the ball had come to him on the edge of the area and, with the centre half closing in on him, he had let fly and, leaning back too far, his shot had ballooned over the bar. Then, a goal down and with less than five minutes to spare, he had nicked the ball away from the fullback, cut inside, and, with only the goalie to beat, had skewed it wide. At the final whistle he had turned away disgusted as the Notts players ran towards their fans in triumph.

"All a long time ago," Resnick said. "Fifteen years."

"And the rest."

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"Think about it much?"

Kiley shook his head. "Hardly at all."

The car swung round into Manvers Road and they were there. Still no one was answering the door. Round at the back, Resnick hesitated only a moment before putting his shoulder to the door, once, twice, before the bolt snapped free. He stepped carefully into the kitchen, Kiley following. Nothing had been moved. The cloth dog, two shades of brown, still sat, neglected, in the hall. The front room was empty and they turned back towards the stairs. A chill spread down the backs of Resnick's legs and along his arms. The stairs creaked a little beneath his weight. A child's blue cardigan lay, discarded, on the landing. The door to the main bedroom was closed.

Drawing a slow breath, Resnick turned the handle. The bed had been hastily made; the wardrobe doors stood open, and several garments had slid from their hangers to the floor. There was no one there.

They turned back towards the other room, its door ajar.

The closer of the two, Kiley looked round at Resnick enquiringly then nudged the door wide.

There were bunk beds against the right-hand wall. Posters on the wall, a white melamine set of drawers. Several clear plastic boxes, stacked on top of one another, filled with toys. Stuffed animals and pieces of Lego and picture books strewn across the floor.

Kiley felt the muscles in his stomach relax. "They're not here."

"Thank God for that."

Back downstairs they stood in the kitchen, Resnick taking in the evidence of hasty sandwich making, the fallen chair.

There were a dozen explanations, mostly harmless, some more plausible than the rest. "You think they've done a runner?" he said.

"I think they might have tried."

"And if they didn't succeed?"

Kiley released a long, slow breath. "Then he's taken them, that's what I'd say."

"Against their will?"

"Odds are."

Resnick called the station from the car; arranged for the place to be secured and scene-of-crime officers to attend. Jumping to conclusions they might be, but better that than to do nothing and wait for bad news.

Terry Anderson had waited, cautious, van parked just around the corner on Exchange Road, back towards the primary school. From there he could see the house, see if Rebecca had any callers, visitors in or out, make sure the coast was clear. Waiting. Watching. Alert. Ready for danger, the least sign. It was nothing to him. What he was trained for. Northern Ireland. Iraq. Afghanistan. Belfast. Basra. Sangin. Someone waiting to take your head off with a rifle

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or blow you to buggery with an RPG.

Little happened. The occasional couple returning home from visiting friends, an hour in the pub, an evening in town. Men taking their dogs for a last walk around the block, pausing, perhaps, to light a cigarette. Television screens flickering brightly between half-closed blinds. House lights going on, going off.

He sat behind the front seats, leaning back, legs stretched in front of him, out of sight to passersby. Beside him in the van were blankets, sleeping bags, bottles of water. A few basic supplies. First-aid kit. Ammunition. Tools. Tinned food. His uniform, folded neatly. Waterproofs. Rope. Prepared.

As he watched, the downstairs room of Rebecca's house went suddenly dark and he imagined, rather than heard, the sound some moments later as she turned the key in the front-door lock.

Careful, he liked that. Not careful enough.

Eleven thirty-five.

She'd been watching, he guessed, a rerun of some American soap or a late-night film and had either got bored or found her eyes closing, unbidden. How many times had they sat together like that in the semi-dark, the change in her breathing alerting him to the fact that she had dropped off, unwillingly, to sleep? Her warm breath when he had leaned over to kiss her, her head turning away.

The upstairs light went on and, for a brief moment, he saw her in silhouette, standing there, looking out, looking down; then the curtains were pulled across, leaving a faint yellowish glow.

Automatically, he rechecked his watch.

Imagined the children, already sleeping.

The houses to either side had gone dark long since, but up and down the street there were still signs of life.

He would wait.

Rebecca stirred, wondering if she had ever really been asleep and, if so, for how long? The bedside clock read 01:14. It was her bladder that had awoken her and, grudgingly, she slid her legs round from beneath the duvet and touched her feet to the carpeted floor. The house was smaller than she might have liked, and at times, even for the three of them, barely large enough—bedlam when one or more of Keiron's friends came round after school to play. But the fixtures and fittings were in better nick than in many of the other places she'd seen and the rent, with her parents' help, was reasonable enough. If it weren't for them, she didn't know what she could have done.

Careful not to flush the toilet for fear of waking Billie—a light sleeper at best—she eased back the door and slipped into their room. Keiron's thumb was in his mouth and carefully she prised it free, causing him to grunt and turn his head sharply to one side, but not to wake. Billie, pink pyjama top gathered at her neck, was clinging to edge of the blanket she had slept with since she was three months old.

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Straightening, Rebecca shivered as if—what did her grandmother used to say?—as if someone had just walked over her grave.

Rubbing her arms beneath the sleeves of the long T-shirt she was wearing, she turned and went softly back to bed, this time, hopefully, to sleep through. The morning would come soon enough.

When she woke again it had just gone two. Levering herself up on to one elbow, she strained to hear. Had one of the children woken and cried out? A dream, perhaps? Or maybe Keiron had got up and gone to the toilet on his own?

No, it was nothing.

The wind, perhaps, rattling the windowpanes.

Her head had barely touched the pillow when she heard it again, for certain this time, the sound that had awoken her, a footstep. Next-door, it had to be next-door. Quite often, late at night, she heard them moving. Early, too. Her breath caught in her throat. No. There was somebody in the house, somebody down below, a footstep on the stairs.

Rebecca froze.

If I close my eyes, will it go away?

It.

He.

Whoever . . .

For the first time she wanted a phone beside the bed, a panic button, something. With a lunge, she threw back the covers and sprang from the bed. Three, four steps and she was at the door and reaching for the light.

Oh, Christ!

The figure of a man, turning at the top of the stairs.

Christ!

Her hand stifled a scream.

"It's all right," the voice said. "It's all right." A voice she recognised, reassuring, commanding.

"Terry?"

He continued slowly towards her, his face still in shadow.

"Terry?"

"Who else?" Almost smiling. "Who else?"

With a sob, she sank to her knees, and he reached down and touched her hair, uncertainly at first, easing her head forward until it rested against his body, one of her hands clinging to his leg, the other pressed hard against the floor.

They stood in the bedroom, Rebecca with a cotton dressing gown pulled hastily round her. She had stopped shaking, but her breathing was still unsteady. He was wearing a black roll-neck sweater, camouflage trousers, black army boots.

"What are you . . . What are you doing?"

When he smiled, nothing changed in his eyes.

"Terry, what . . ."

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"Get the children."
"What?"
"Get yourself dressed and then get the children."
"No, you can't . . ."
When he reached towards her, she flinched.
"Just something sensible, jeans. Nothing fancy. Them the same."
She waited until he turned away.
"Keiron and Billie, they're in back, are they?"
"Yes, but let me go first, you'll frighten them."
"No, it's okay. You get on."
"Terry, no . . ."
"Get on."
"You won't . . ."
He looked at her then. "Hurt them?"
"Yes."
He shook his head. "They're my kids, aren't they?"
Billie was awake when he got to the door and when he moved closer towards her she screamed. Rebecca, half-dressed, came running, brushed past him, and took the three-year-old into her arms. "It's all right, sweetheart, it's only Daddy."
She sobbed against Rebecca's shoulder.
On the top bunk, Keiron stirred, blinking towards the landing light. "Dad?"

Fingers and thumbs, Rebecca helped them into their clothes, Keiron with a school sweatshirt pulled down over his Forest top, Billie snapped into her blue dungarees.
"Where we going, Mum?" Keiron asked.
"I'm not sure, love."
"An adventure," his father said, coming through the door. "We're going on an adventure."
"Really?"
"You bet!" He tousled the boy's hair.
"You mean like camping?"
"Yes, a bit like that."
"Like you in the army."
"Yes. Like that."
"Some of the year-sixes go camping overnight. Cook their own food and everything. Can we do that?"
"Prob'ly. We'll see."
"And take a pack-up? Can we take a pack-up?"
"No need, son. I've got all the stuff we need."
"But they do, carry it with them. Can't we?"
"Yes, all right, then. Why not? Becca, how about it? Like the boy says. Fix us something quick. Sandwich, anything. Go on, I'll finish up here."
When he got down to the kitchen, a few minutes later, there was

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bread, a pot of jam, and some cheese but no Rebecca; he found her in the front room, texting on her mobile phone.

"The hell!"

Before he could reach her, she'd pressed Delete. Swinging her hard towards him, he snatched the phone from her hand. "Who was that going to be to? The police?" He hurled the phone against the wall and, pushing her aside, crushed it with the heel of his boot. "Now get in that kitchen and get finished. Five minutes and we're leaving. Five."

Keiron was standing, open mouthed, at the living-room door and behind him somewhere Billie had started to cry.

It was early evening and they were sitting in Resnick's office, a light rain blurring the window, the intermittent snarl and hum of traffic from the street.

"Here's what we've got so far," Resnick said. "Two sets of adult prints in the house, one we're assuming are Terry Anderson's. Looks as if he forced the lock on the back door. Not difficult. Explains why it was only bolted across. There was a mobile phone, Rebecca's, in the front room. Beneath the settee. Broken. Smashed on purpose."

"Used recently?" Kiley asked.

"One call earlier that evening, to a friend. We've already spoken to her, nothing there."

"No mention of going away, taking a trip?"

"Nothing."

"And the husband? She didn't say anything about him? Being worried at all?"

Resnick shook his head. "We've checked with the school and the nursery where she takes the little girl. Both were surprised when the kids didn't turn up this morning. Nursery phoned but got no answer, assumed she'd been taken sick. School, the same."

Kiley shifted uncomfortably on his chair.

"More luck with the neighbours," Resnick said. "Old lady next-door, bit of a light sleeper, reckons she heard a child scream. A little after two. Either that or a fox, she couldn't be sure. Person from across the street, sleeps with the window open, thinks he might have heard a vehicle driving away, that would be later, around two-thirty. There's not a lot more. A couple of people mentioned seeing a van parked in Exchange Road, just around the corner. Not usually there. Small, white, maybe a black stripe down the side. Could have been a Citroën, according to one. We're following that up, checking CCTV. That time of night, roads shouldn't be too busy. Might spot something." He leaned back. "Not a lot else to go on."

"You've sent out descriptions?" Kiley said.

"As best we can. Local airports. Birmingham."

"They could have gone with him willingly," Kiley said.

"Is that what you think?"

"What I'd like to think," Kiley said. "Not the same thing."

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Keiron helped him put up the tent. The trees in that part of the forest had mostly lost their leaves, but the undergrowth was thick enough to shield them from sight. None of the regular paths came near. Tent up, they foraged for fallen branches and dragged them to the site, arranging them over the bracken. Several times, Keiron cut himself on thorns and briars, but he just sucked at the blood and bit back the tears. Big boy, trying not to be afraid.

"How long?" Rebecca wanted to ask. "How long are we going to be here?" Reading the look on Anderson's face, she said nothing.

The sandwiches were finished quickly. Amongst the supplies he had provided were tins of corned beef and baked beans, peach slices in syrup. Biscuits. Bottles of water. Tea bags and a jar of instant coffee, though he didn't want the risk of lighting a fire. They had driven the van some way along the main track, then gone the rest of the way on foot, making two journeys to carry everything. Still dark. Just the light of a single torch. Taking Keiron with him, Anderson had gone back to move the van.

Before leaving, he had taken Rebecca to one side. "You'll be here when we get back, you and Billie. Right here. Okay?"

"Yes." A whisper.

"I'm sorry?"

"I said, yes. Yes, all right." Not able to look him in the eye.

"It better be."

By the time they had returned, Keiron was exhausted, out on his feet, and his father had had to carry him the last half-mile. Billie was asleep, stretched across her mother's lap. While he had been away, she had tried walking a little way in each direction, taking Billie with her, careful never to wander too far and lose her way back. She had seen nobody, heard nothing. She felt stupid for not doing anything more, without knowing what, safely, she could have done.

"You look knackered," Anderson said. "Tired out. Why don't you get your head down? Get a bit of sleep while you can."

When she opened her eyes, not so many minutes later, he was sitting cross-legged at the far side of the tent, rifle close beside him, painstakingly cleaning his knife.

Not wanting to stand around like a spare part, waiting, Kiley had walked into the city, found a halfway-decent place for breakfast, and settled down to a bacon cob with brown sauce and a mug of serious tea and tried to concentrate on his book. No such luck. Jennie had rung him earlier on his mobile and he'd hesitated before giving her a truncated version of what little they knew, what they surmised.

"Don't say anything to his mother," he said. "Not yet, anyway."

"What d'you take me for?"

"I'll call you if I know anything more definite."

"You promise?"

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Kiley promised. Breakfast over, he wandered around the city centre. The square in front of the council building was going through some kind of makeover; maybe they were turning it into a car park. The pavements were busy with early shoppers, people hurrying, late, to work, the occasional drinker with his can of cider clutched tight. He walked up the hill towards the Theatre Royal. Duncan Preston in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. All next week, *The Rocky Horror Show*. Big-Time American Wrestling at the Royal Concert Hall. He was halfway down King Street, heading back towards the square, when his mobile rang. It was Resnick. They'd found something.

There was an OS map open on the table when Kiley arrived, the blurred image of a van frozen on the computer screen. Nighttime. Overhead lights reflected in the road surface. There were several other officers in the room.

"Two sightings of the possible van," Resnick said.

One of the officers, dark hair, dandruff on his shoulders, set the CCTV footage in motion.

"The first here, junction 27 of the M1, leaving the motorway and heading east towards the A608. And then here—see the time code—not so many minutes later, at the roundabout where it joins the 611. Turning south."

"Back towards the city?" Kiley said, surprised.

"Could be," Resnick said, "but for my money, more likely heading here. Annesley Forest." He was pointing at a patch of green covering almost two squares of the map.

"Why there?"

"Couple of years back, just north of here, Annesley Woodhouse, this man was found dead outside his home, ex-miner, lacerations to the head and upper body, crossbow found close-by."

"Robin bloody Hood," someone remarked.

"According to what we heard," Resnick continued, "there'd been one heck of a row between the dead man and a neighbour, all harking back to the miners' strike, 'eighty-four. When we went to talk to the neighbour, of course he'd scarpered, gone to ground right there." Resnick pointed again. "Two and a half kilometres of woodland. Then, as if that weren't bad enough, a second man, wanted for turning a shotgun on his own daughter, went missing in the same area. Bloody nightmare. We had extra personnel drafted in from all over, round five hundred all told. Dog teams, helicopters, everything. If that's where Anderson's gone, he could stay holed up for weeks."

"But we don't know for sure," Kiley said

"We know next to bugger all," one of the officers said.

Resnick silenced him with a look. "There's forest all around," he said, "not just this patch here. A lot of it, though, is criss-crossed with trails, paths going right through. Sherwood Forest, especially, up by the Major Oak, even at this time of the year it's pretty busy with visitors. But this is different. Quiet."

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Looking at the map, Kiley nodded. "How sure are we about the van?" he said.

"Traced the number plate. Citroën Berlingo. Rented from a place in north London—Edgware—two days ago. Name of Terence Alderman. Alderman, Anderson, TA, close enough. Paid in cash."

"If he's gone into the woods . . ." Kiley began.

"Then he'll have likely dumped the van. We've got people out looking now. Until that turns up, or we get reports of a sighting, it's still pretty much conjecture. And, as far as we know, nobody's been harmed."

"I doubt if he's taken them for their own good."

"Even so. I need a little more before I can order up a major search. Request one, at least."

By which time, Kiley thought, what they were fearing, but not yet saying, could already have happened.

"I thought I might take a ride out that way," Resnick said. "Want to come along?"

While Rebecca watched, Anderson had talked both children into a game of hide and seek, warning them not to stray too far. Billie giggled from the most obvious hiding places, waving her arms, as if the point of the game was to be found. Once, Keiron skinnied down inside a hollow oak and stayed there so silent that his father, fearing maybe he'd run off, had called his name in anger and the boy had only shown himself reluctantly, scared of a telling-off or worse.

They picked at the corned beef, ate biscuits and cold beans, drank the sweet syrupy peach juice straight from the cans.

"We should have done this more often," Anderson said.

"Done what?" said Rebecca sharply.

"Gone camping," he said and laughed.

Sitting on the ground outside the tent, he showed his son how to strip down the rifle and reassemble it again.

"Can we go after some rabbits?" Keiron asked.

"Maybe tomorrow."

"Will we still be here tomorrow?"

He left the question unanswered.

Just out of sight, beyond some trees, Anderson had dug a latrine. Walking back, Rebecca was aware of him watching her, the movement of her body inside her clothes.

"Are you seeing anyone?" he asked.

"Seeing?"

"You know what I mean."

"No."

"No man then?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"I don't know. I'm just not."

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"You should."

She went on past him and into the tent.

The day was sealed in with grey. Low hedgerows and mudded tracks and the occasional ploughed field. Why was it, Kiley asked himself, they didn't seem to plough fields anymore, ploughed and left bare? Londoner that he was, he could swear that was what he remembered, travelling north to visit relations in Bucks. Mile after mile of ploughed fields. That rackety little train that stopped everywhere. What was it? Hemel Hempstead, Kings Langley, Abbots Langley, Berkhamstead, Tring? His uncle, red-faced and—now, he thought, looking back—unreal, waiting outside the station at Leighton Buzzard, to take them home in a Rover that rattled more than the carriages of the train.

Resnick had opted to drive, the two of them up front as they made a careful circuit: Newstead, Papplewick pumping station, Ravenshead, south of Mansfield and back again, the A611 straight as a die from the corner of Cauldwell Wood, across Cox Moor to Robin Hood's Hill and the supposed site of Robin Hood's Cave. Then back down towards the forest, the trees at first bordering both sides of the road and then running thickly to the left.

"Do you ever miss it?" Resnick asked, out of nowhere.

It took Kiley a moment to respond. "Playing?"

A grunt he took to mean yes. What answer did he want? "Sometimes," Kiley said. "Once in a while."

"Like when?"

Kiley smiled. "Most Saturday afternoons."

"You don't play at all?"

"Not for years. Helped a friend coach some kids for a while, that was all."

Resnick eased down on the brake and pulled out to pass an elderly man on a bicycle, raincoat flapping in the wind, cloth cap pulled down, bottoms of his trousers tied up with string.

"Up and down this road, I shouldn't wonder," Resnick said, "since nineteen fifty-three or thereabouts."

Kiley smiled. "How about you?" he said. "County. You still go?"

"For my sins."

"Perhaps we'll catch a game sometime?"

"Perhaps."

Resnick's phone rang and he answered, slowing to the side of the road. "We've found the van," he said, breaking the connection. "Aldercar Wood. No more than a mile from here. Off the main road to the left."

It had been driven beyond the end of the track and into some trees, covered over with bracken, the inside stripped clear. The main area of forest was clearly visible across two fields, stretching north and west.

"Looks like your surmise was correct," Kiley said.

Resnick nodded. "Looks like."

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Anderson had gone silent, drawn back into himself. No more family games. Once, when Keiron had run over to him, excited about something he'd found, his father had just stared at him, blank, and the boy had backed nervously away, before running to his mother and burying his face against her chest.

Billie fretted and whined until Rebecca plaited her hair and told her the story of Sleeping Beauty yet again, the little girl's face lighting up at the moment when the princess is kissed awake. She'll learn, Rebecca thought, and hopefully before it's too late.

"How did the prince find her?" Billie asked, not for the first time.

"He cut his way through the undergrowth with his sword."

"Perhaps someone will find us like that," Billie said.

Rebecca glanced across at Anderson, but if he had heard he gave no sign.

A light rain had started to fall.

Without preamble, Anderson sprang to his feet and pulled on his cagoule. "Just a walk," he said. "I'll not be long."

A moment later, he was striding through the trees.

Keiron ran after him, calling; tripped and fell, ran and tripped again; finally turned and came limping towards the tent.

"He isn't coming back," the boy said, crestfallen.

Rebecca kissed him gently on his head. "We'll see."

An hour passed. Two. Once Rebecca thought she heard voices and called out in their direction, but there was no reply and the voices faded away till there were just the sounds of the forest. Distant cars. An aeroplane overhead.

"I told you," Keiron said accusingly and kicked at the ground.

"Right," Rebecca said, making up her mind. "Put on your coats and scarves. We're going."

"Where? To find Daddy?"

"Yes," Rebecca lied.

Billie fussed with her buttons and when Rebecca knelt to help her, the child pushed her away. "I can do it. I can do it myself."

"Well, get a move on."

"I am." Bottom lip stuck petulantly out.

Calm down, Rebecca told herself. Calm down.

Billie pushed the last button into place.

"All right?" Rebecca said. "Come on, then. Let's go."

They were a hundred metres away, maybe less, heading in what Rebecca thought was the direction they'd originally come, when they saw him just a short way ahead, walking purposefully towards them.

"Come to meet me? That's nice."

As the children went into the tent, he pulled her back. "Try that again and I'll kill you, so help me."

There were only a couple of hours of daylight left. By the time they

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had got a decent-sized search party organised there would be even less. Best to wait until first light.

"I've been talking to the Royal Military police," Resnick said. "Seems as though one sergeant going AWOL isn't too high on their list of priorities. Too many of them, apparently, done the same. Not too keen on hurrying back to fight for someone else's democracy. More interested in tracking down a batch of illicit guns, smuggled into the U.K. from Iraq via Germany. Bit of a burgeoning trade in exchanging them for drugs and currency. Cocaine, especially. Still, they're sending someone up tomorrow. If we do find Anderson, they'll want to stake their claim."

"Till then we twiddle our thumbs."

"Do better than that, I dare say," Resnick said.

Tony Burns was up from London, sitting in with a local band at The Five Ways. Geoff Pearson on bass, the usual crew. Last time Resnick had heard Burns, a good few years back, he'd been playing mostly baritone, a little alto. Now it was all tenor, a sound not too many miles this side of Stan Getz. Jake McMahon joined them for the last number, a tear-up through the chords of "Cherokee." By now the free cobs were going round, end of the evening, cheese or ham, and Kiley was having a pretty good time.

Resnick had called Lynn and asked her if she wanted to join them, but instead she had opted for an early night. She'd left him a note on the kitchen table, signed with love.

Resnick made coffee and, feeling expansive, cracked open a bottle of Highland Park. They sat listening to Ben Webster and Art Tatum and then Monk fingering his way through "Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea," Kiley not without envy for what seemed, in some respects, a fuller, more comfortable life than his own.

"Well," said Resnick, finally, levering himself up from his chair. "Early start."

"You bet."

The bed was made up in the spare room, a clean towel laid out and, should he need it, a new toothbrush in its plastic case. He thought he might manage a few more pages of *The Man Who Liked Slow Tomatoes* before dropping off, but when he woke in the morning, the book had fallen to the floor, unread.

Wherever he'd gone in those two hours, Anderson had come back with a bottle of vodka. Stolichnaya. Perhaps he'd had it with him all along. He sat there, close to the entrance to the tent, drinking steadily. Rebecca tried to get the children to eat something but to little avail. She forced herself to try some of the corned beef, though it was something she'd never liked. The children drank water, nibbled biscuits. And moped.

The rain outside increased until it began seeping under one corner of the tent.

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Billie lay down, sucking her thumb, and, for once, Rebecca made no attempt to stop her. If Keiron, huddled into a blanket near her feet, was asleep or not she wasn't sure.

The bottle was now half empty.

Anderson stared straight ahead, seeing something she couldn't see.

"Terry?"

At the softness of her voice, he flinched.

"How long is it since you got any sleep?"

Whenever she had awoken in the early hours after they'd arrived, he had been sitting, shoulders hunched, alert and keeping guard.

"How long?"

"I don't know. A long time."

"What's wrong?"

For an answer he lifted the bottle to his lips.

"Perhaps you should talk to someone? About what's troubling you? Perhaps . . ."

"Stop it! Just shut the hell up!"

"Stop what?"

"Wheedling round me." He mimicked her voice. " 'Perhaps you should talk to someone, Terry?' As if you gave a shit."

"I do."

"Yeah?" He laughed. "You don't give a shit about me and I don't give a shit about you. Not anymore."

"Then why are we here?"

"Because of them. Because they have to know."

"Know what?"

He moved suddenly. "Wake them. Go on, wake them up."

"No, look, they're exhausted. Let them sleep."

But Billie was already stirring and Keiron was awake.

Anderson took another long swallow from the bottle. His skin was sallow and beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead and his temples. When he started talking, his voice seemed distant, even in the confines of the tent.

"We were on patrol, just routine. There'd been a firefight a couple of days before, so we were more on our guard than usual. Against snipers but also for explosives. IEDs. We were passing this house and this woman came out, just her face showing, part of her face, the eyes, and she's waving her arms and wailing and pointing back towards the house as if there's something wrong, and Sean, he jumps down, even though we're telling him not to be stupid, and the next thing we know, he's followed her to the doorway, and the next after that he's been shot. One gets him in the body and knocks him back, but he's wearing his chest plate, thank Christ, so that's all right, but the next one takes him in the neck. By now we're returning fire and the woman's disappeared, nowhere to be fucking seen, Sean's leaking blood into the bloody ground, so we drag him out of there, back into the vehicle and head back to camp."

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Beside Rebecca, Keiron, wide-eyed, listened enthralled. Billie clutched her mother's hand and flinched each time her father swore.

"He died, that's the thing. Sean. The bullet'd torn an artery and the bleeding wouldn't stop. By the time we reached camp, he was dead. He was our mate, a laugh. A real laugh. Always saw the funny side. Just a young bloke. Twenty-one. And stupid. Young and stupid. He'd wanted to help." Anderson took a quick swallow and wiped his mouth. "Two days later, we went back. Went back at night, five of us. We'd been drinking beforehand, pretty heavily, talking about what had happened, what they'd done to Sean."

Rebecca shivered and hugged the children close.

"We went in under cover of darkness. There was no moon, I remember, not then. Sometimes it'd be, you know, huge, filling half the sky, but that night there was nothing. Just a few stars. Everyone inside was sleeping. Women. Men." He paused. "Children. Soon as we got inside one of the men reached for his gun, he'd been sleeping with it, under the blankets, and that's when we started firing. Firing at anything that moved. One of the women, she came running at us, screaming, and Steve, he says, 'That's her. That's her, the lyin' bitch.' And, of course, dressed like she was, like they all were, he had no way of knowing, but that didn't stop him all but emptying his magazine into her."

"That's enough," Rebecca said. "Enough."

"There was a girl," Anderson said, ignoring her, "hiding in one of the other rooms. Twelve, maybe thirteen. I don't know. Could've been younger. Steve grabbed hold of her and threw her down on the floor and then one of the others started to tear off her clothes."

"Stop," Rebecca said. "Please stop. They don't need to hear this."

"Yes, they do! Yes, they do!"

Keiron was not looking, refusing to look, pressing his face into his mother's side.

"We all knew what was going to happen. Steve's standing over her, pulling off the last of her things, and she calls him a name and spits at him and he leans down and punches her in the face, and then he's on his knees, unzipping himself, and we're all watching, a couple cheering him on, give it to her, give it to her, clapping like it's some game, and that's when I tell him, I tell him twice to stop and he just carries on and I couldn't, I couldn't, I couldn't just stand there and watch—she was just a child!—and I shot him, through the back of the head. Blood and gunk all over the girl's face and she wriggles out from under and grabs her clothes and runs and we're left standing there. All except for Steve. He was my mate, too, they all were, and I'd killed him over some girl who, even before that happened, would've happily seen us blown to smithereens."

He wiped away some of the sweat that was running into his eyes. Tears were running soundlessly down Rebecca's face.

"We all agreed, the rest of us, to claim he'd got caught in the

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crossfire. After what had happened, no one was going to want to tell the truth."

"Except you," Rebecca said.

"This is different." He nodded towards the children. "They needed to know."

"Why?"

"So they can understand."

And his hands reached down towards his rifle.

Not long after first light, a police helicopter, flying low over the forest, reported a woman and two children standing in a small clearing, waving a makeshift flag.

Armed officers secured the area. Rebecca and the children were escorted to the perimeter, where paramedics were waiting. Anderson was found lying inside the tent, a dark cagoule covering his face, his discharged weapon close at hand. At the hospital later, after she had rested and the medical staff had examined her, Rebecca slowly began to tell Resnick and a female liaison officer her story. The children were in another room with a nurse and their maternal grandmother.

Later still, relishing the chance to stretch his legs, Resnick had walked with Kiley the short distance through the city centre to the railway station. Already, a rush edition of the *Post* was on the streets. It would be national news for a moment, a day, page one beneath the fold, then a short column on page six, a paragraph on page thirteen. Forgotten. One of those things that happen, stress of combat, balance of mind disturbed. Rebecca had told the police her husband's story, as well as she remembered, what he'd seen, the attack at night, the confusion, the young Iraqi girl, the fellow soldier caught in the crossfire and killed in front of his eyes. He hadn't been able to sleep, she said, not since that happened. I don't think he could face going back to it again.

"Not what you wanted, Jack," Resnick said, shaking his hand.

The 15:30 to London St. Pancras was on time.

"None of us," Kiley said.

"We'll catch that game some time."

"Yes. I'd like that."

Kiley hurried down the steps onto the platform.

He phoned Jennie Calder from the train. In a little over two hours' time he would be crossing towards the flats where Mary Anderson lived and climbing the stairs, "Welcome" on the mat, but not for him, her face, when she opened the door, wet with tears. ●

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Any Notts County supporters reading this will forgive me, I trust, for playing fast and loose with the details of the club's highly successful FA Cup run in 1990/91. Manchester City not Charlton Athletic. Come on, you Pies!

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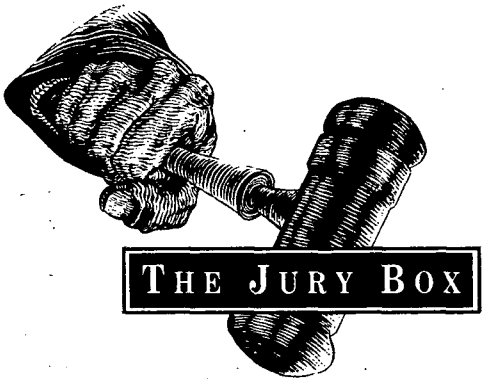

THE JURY BOX

by Jon L. Breen

My very first "Jury Box" column back in January 1977 led off with mysteries in translation: two of them, by Poul Orum and Hansjorg Martin, bookending a novel by Janwillem van de Wetering, a Dutchman who usually wrote in English. Until very recently, I would have been amazed to have enough mysteries in translation to fill a column. Now, as another annual roundup approaches, no fewer than 28 new novels from 11 languages clamor for attention. For the statistically inclined, the breakdown by language follows: Afrikaans 1, Dutch 1, French 2, German 3, Icelandic 1, Italian 3, Japanese 2, Norwegian 2, Russian 2, Spanish 4, Swedish 7. The selection below considers nine books representing seven languages.

***** Arnaldur Indridason: *The Draining Lake*, translated from the Icelandic by Bernard Scudder, St. Martin's Minotaur /Dunne, $24.95. This thoughtful, intricate, and beautifully executed combination of police procedural, spy novel, semi-inverted detective story, and essay on the human condition confirms the high reputation of a multiple-award-winning writer. In the present, dour and depressive Erlendur Sveinsson, a police inspector obsessed with missing persons, leads a team seeking the identity of a decades-dead skeleton found in the titular lake, which is receding as a result of an earthquake. The parallel back story recounts an Icelandic student's days in East Germany during the Cold War. Involving characters, historical perspective, and the gradual revelation of secrets make this one of the best novels of the year.

**** Fred Vargas: *This Night's Foul Work*, translated from the French by Siân Reynolds, Penguin, $14. Commissaire Jean-Baptiste Adamsberg, an eccentric Paris detective with an assortment of equally quirky subordinates, inhabits a house allegedly haunted by the ghost of a murderous nun while investigating the more-than-meets-the-eye killing of a pair of drug

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dealers. Among the other elements in this wildly but gloriously plotted novel: a new recruit who speaks in verse, ritualistic killings of stags, a police station cat with seemingly super-feline powers, a serial-killing nurse, and grave robberies of recently deceased women. Vargas won't appeal to every reader, but those who bail out early will miss some of the most original writing and puzzle-spinning in recent memory.

**** Andrea Camilleri: *The Paper Moon*, translated from the Italian by Steven Sartarelli, Penguin, $13. In the best book I've read from a consistently rewarding series, Sicilian Inspector Montalbano investigates the murder of a pharmaceutical salesman (now known by the ambiguous euphemism "informer") who has complicated relationships with several beautiful women, including an unusually clinging sister and a mistress whose elderly schoolteacher husband ostensibly knows and approves. All the series attributes—the humanly flawed and likeable central character, his humorous dealings with colleagues, the intricate plotting, the surprising but credible climactic twists—are stronger than ever.

**** Leonardo Padura: *Havana Gold*, translated from the Spanish by Peter Bush, Bitter Lemon, $14.95. The novels about Cuban cop and wannabe writer Mario Conde form one of the finest contemporary detective series in any language, notable for their lyrical style, vivid background, and ongoing paean to friendship. In 1989, the sentimental Conde falls in love (the reader suspects unwisely) while investigating the murder of a young high school teacher with close relationships to her students. The British translator, in an otherwise excellent job, continues to mangle the lingo of baseball, which unlike cricket is not played on a pitch.

**** Åsa Larsson: *The Black Path*, translated from the Swedish by Marlaine Delargy, Delta, $12. Cruelly damaged but remarkably resilient lawyer Rebecka Martinsson and domestically contented police detective Anna-Maria Mella return in another psychologically complex and masterfully constructed case, which begins with the body of a young woman found in an ice-fishing ark (or moveable cabin) on a frozen Swedish lake and comes to involve the troubled circle of a brilliant but socially maladjusted mining entrepreneur. Larsson is an extraordinary talent, who brings her characters and background to vivid life and accomplishes major shifts in time and viewpoint without losing the reader.

*** Carlo Lucarelli: *Via Delle Oche*, translated from the Italian by Michael Reynolds, Europa, $14.95. As a 1948 Italian election approaches, Commissario De Luca, a dedicated cop with Fascist baggage, believes the death by hanging of a Communist brothel bouncer is murder, but political considerations in the Bologna police insist on suicide. The third of a trilogy,

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this novella-length case is well told and historically informative.

*** Karin Alvtegen: *Missing*, translated from the Swedish by Anna Paterson, Felony & Mayhem, $24. Sibylla Forsenström, a homeless woman from an economically privileged but emotionally deprived family background, manages to work a middle-aged businessman for dinner and an overnight stay in a posh Stockholm hotel, but becomes a fugitive murder suspect when he is found dead and ritually mutilated. In a deftly constructed psychological thriller, the author juggles the reader's responses to the obvious question: Did she really do it? The solution includes a bizarre and maybe original motive for serial murder.

*** Asa Nonami: *Now You're One of Us*, translated from the Japanese by Michael Volek and Mitsuko Volek, Vertical, $14.95. Noriko, against advice of her family and friends, marries on the condition that she and her husband will continue to live with his large and well-to-do suburban Tokyo family, including a near-centenarian great-grandmother, an invalid grandfather, a mentally handicapped brother, and three generations of serene and oddly upbeat women. Noriko's gradual and horrified exploration of the family secrets begins as suspenseful variation on the modern gothic and ends as a chilling specimen of non-supernatural horror.

*** Baantjer: *DeKok and Murder on Blood Mountain*, translated from the Dutch by H.G. Smittenaar, Speck, $24. At the request of the Belgian police, the aged inspector and his younger partner Vledder attend the Amsterdam funeral of a Dutch citizen found floating in Antwerp's Scheldt River. DeKok disrupts the burial giving chase to a man he knew to be dead, beginning a case that will take him out of Holland for the first time. This is a comfortable series and something of a throwback: brief, neatly plotted, with continuing characters who change little from book to book. Internal evidence suggests the translator has done some updating of the 1985 original.

The anthology of Italian crime stories *Crimini* (Bitter Lemon, $14.95), edited by Giancarlo De Cataldo and translated by Andrew Brown, includes contributions from Camilleri and Lucarelli (see above), both non-series and the latter especially impressive, along with eight contemporaries. Most of the 18 stories in *Paris Noir* (Serpent's Tail, $14.95), edited by Maxim Jakubowski, are by British or American writers, but contributions from Marc Villard, Jean-Hughes Opel, Dominique Manotti, Dominique Sylvain, and Romain Slocombe have been translated from the French by Lulu Norman and Ros Schwartz.

Among the reprints is one of Georges Simenon's best and most typical novels about his famous Parisian cop, first published in France in 1953 and in the U.S. in 1975: *Maigret and the Man on the Boulevard* (Penguin, $13), translated from the French by Eileen Ellenbogen. ●

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CANDLES ON THE CORNER

by Janet Dawson

Twelve candles, one for each year of Emily Gebhardt's life, stood in a row on the grassy strip between sidewalk and curb. Each evening, Emily's parents lit fresh candles. The flames flickered like beacons in the darkness, burning out long before morning.

At each end of the row were plastic vases filled with fresh flowers—roses, tulips, iris, daffodils—in Emily's favorite colors, pink and yellow. A pink umbrella, its handle lengthened by a broomstick stuck into the ground, sheltered a small easel from the spring rain. The easel held a color photograph of Emily and a newspaper clipping.

Janet Dawson's last *EQMM* story, "Slayer Statute," featuring series character Jeri Howard, earned a 2004 Shamus Award nomination for best short story. She returns with another entry in the Howard series. This time out the Oakland P.I. investigates the hit-and-run death of a child. Ms. Dawson has penned nine Jeri Howard novels. She's a former newspaper reporter who later joined the staff of UC Berkeley. †

The shrine—that's what it was, really—had been on the corner where I stood for the past month. I stepped up to the easel and examined Emily's picture. I saw wide blue eyes, a cheerful smile on a round face, and brown curls tied back with pink and yellow ribbons. Emily had been a pretty girl poised on the verge of adolescence, just twelve years old. She'd never see thirteen.

I turned from the shrine and looked out at Grand Street. Emily's parents had spray-painted slogans on the pavement in the middle of the intersection. They'd done so without the blessing of the Alameda authorities, who'd nevertheless let the words stay there, to be gradually worn away by rain and the tires of passing vehicles. I read the messages, painted in eye-catching Day-Glo pink and yellow: "Slow Down," "Drive 25," "Children Crossing," and "Emily Died Here."

Emily's parents said most people in the neighborhood seemed protective of their makeshift memorial. But not everyone respected the shrine. Several times the Gebhardts had arrived with fresh

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flowers and candles to discover all the items missing. Not vandalized, just gone. Each time, they simply rebuilt the memorial to their daughter.

I'd read the police report and talked with the investigating officer. On a Wednesday afternoon in April, Emily and two friends had just been released from the confines of the nearby middle school. They were crossing Grand Street at this corner when Emily dropped something. She went back to retrieve it.

The witnesses all agreed on one thing—the vehicle that raced down Grand Street and smashed into Emily was going much too fast for a residential area, much faster than the twenty-five miles per hour limit posted all over Alameda. The impact tossed the girl into the air. She died a short time later.

Now there were candles on the corner.

The vehicle didn't stop after hitting Emily. The driver sped down Grand Street and hung a left on Otis Drive, narrowly missing other pedestrians and cars, weaving in and out of traffic as it raced past the nearby shopping center. At Park Street the vehicle ran a red light and left squealing brakes in its wake. A few moments later a vehicle traveling at a high rate of speed crossed the drawbridge at the southern end of the island that is Alameda. Once it reached Doolittle Drive, the vehicle vanished. Perhaps the driver had turned right on Island Drive, or continued south, toward Oakland International Airport, or detoured onto Hegenberger Road or 98th Avenue to cut over to the freeway.

When it came to a description, the witnesses diverged widely, as witnesses do. People saw a flash of silver, gold, blue, green, brown, red. No one was sure whether the vehicle was big or small, a car or an SUV, what make or model. No one offered a description of the driver's gender or appearance. No one could recall license-plate numbers or letters, or whether they were California plates. No one knew where to find the vehicle or the driver who'd been at the wheel.

Emily Gebhardt's parents grieved, full of sadness, anger, and frustration, dissatisfied with the slow progress of the police investigation. They wanted answers. They wanted someone to blame, someone to pay. So they came to me, Jeri Howard, private investigator working out of Oakland. I wasn't sure I could give the Gebhardts what they wanted. But in the face of that much raw pain, I had to try.

I took a small digital camera from my purse and shot photographs of the intersection, from different angles, then pictures of the shrine. As I lowered the camera, a woman came out the front door of the big two-story Victorian house on the corner. She stalked across the lawn toward me, a decidedly belligerent look on her face.

"Are you one of those people who's been leaving this stuff here?" she demanded. I guessed she meant the easel, the flowers, the can-

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dles on the corner.

"Why? Are you one of those people who's been removing this stuff?"

She looked nonplussed. I looked her over. She was in her mid forties, blond hair coiffed in a head-hugging style, lots of makeup, and flinty hazel eyes. She rethought her opening and dredged up a smile that curved her lips only slightly. "Look, I own this house. I'm tired of those people leaving this stuff in my yard."

I glanced at Emily's shrine. "It's here for a reason."

"I know why it's here." She sounded exasperated and glanced dismissively at the shrine. "But it's been a month."

"A month is a short time when you've lost a child." That's the loss many people never get over.

The woman's mouth tightened. "There's such a thing as excessive grief."

Okay, I was ready to declare her winner of the insensitivity sweepstakes. I guess she figured now that their only child's funeral was over, the Gebhardts should just get a grip and go on with their lives.

"Did you remove the items?"

"I just put my house on the market," she snapped. "The real-estate agent's showing the place to prospective buyers. This stuff looks tacky and garish. Do you see my problem?"

"You certainly have one. You didn't answer my question. Did you remove the items?"

She glared at me. "Who are you? Why do you want to know?"

I handed her one of my business cards. She held it gingerly between thumb and forefinger as though she was afraid she might catch something.

"A private detective? Surely those people didn't hire you to find out who took the stuff. For God's sake, those people need to get a life."

I bit back the words that sizzled on my tongue, instead asking the question again. "Did you remove the items?"

She backed away from me, sputtering angrily. "It's my property. You tell those people I want that stuff gone, permanently. I've complained to the police and they won't do anything. Next I'll be talking to my lawyer." She turned and stalked back to her house, slamming the front door for good measure.

Talk about excessive. Her reaction to the shrine was just that. Why was she so discomfited by the memorial? Who was she? I could find out easily enough from the Alameda county property-tax records. I glanced at the For Sale sign near the woman's front walk, noting the name of the real-estate agent and firm.

"Don't pay her any mind."

I turned and saw a man walking a dog. The man had white hair and a stiff, arthritic gait. The dog, a sturdy brindle mongrel, was

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white around the muzzle, as elderly as the man who held her leash. Cataracts clouded the dog's eyes, but the old man's eyes were sharp behind his glasses.

"Who is she?" I gestured at the house on the corner.

"Peggy Blaine," he said. "She owns this house. I'm Fred Sutton. I live next-door, with my daughter and her family. Peggy's nice enough, most of the time. But she's got a mouth on her when she gets going."

I hauled out another business card and introduced myself to Fred Sutton and his dog Aggie, who very much liked being scratched between her floppy ears. I told Mr. Sutton I was looking into the hit-and-run that killed Emily Gebhardt.

"Dreadful, awful thing." He shook his head, a frown pulling down the corners of his mouth. "I saw it. Wish I hadn't. Me and Aggie was out for our afternoon constitutional. We walk down by the beach every afternoon, rain or shine. Keeps us both from getting too stove up. Me and Aggie was just over there." He pointed to the other side of the cross street. "That car zoomed past like it was in a race. Didn't even brake. At least I didn't hear any screeches like brakes. Just screams. The car slammed right into that poor little girl. She went flying through the air and landed here by the corner. Died before the paramedics got here." He shuddered. "Horrible, just horrible. I'll never forget it, try as I might."

Fred Sutton's description of the vehicle was predictably vague. "I don't recall the color. Happened so fast it was just a blur. These days I can't tell one car from another. And those boxy SUVs all look alike to me."

I glanced at Peggy Blaine's driveway and saw a maroon SUV. From this distance I couldn't tell the make or model. I pointed at the For Sale sign on the front lawn. "When did Ms. Blaine put her house on the market?"

He rubbed his chin. "I think it was right after that little girl got killed. Can't say I'm surprised she's selling. Peggy and her husband split up a few years back. Her son lives with her, but he's in college now, commutes over to San Francisco State. I figure it won't be long before he moves out. Then Peggy will be rattling around like a pea in a jar, all by herself in that big house."

Emily Gebhardt had died the second week in April. It was now mid May. Peggy Blaine told me she'd just put her house on the market, making it sound as though the For Sale sign had gone up in the past week or so. Why the discrepancy? Maybe Peggy Blaine had another reason for feeling uncomfortable about the candles on the corner, sprung up near her house like toadstools after rain.

I shook Fred Sutton's hand and scratched Aggie between her floppy ears. As he walked away, I took additional pictures of the area, maneuvering close enough to snap a shot of the plate number on Peggy Blaine's SUV. The curtain on the living room window twitched, as though someone stood there watching.

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I retrieved my car and drove down Grand Street, turning left on Otis Drive, as the hit-and-run driver had. Then I parked and walked toward the group of girls in shorts and T-shirts who were kicking a ball around the grassy expanse of Rittler Park. I'd arranged to meet Emily's friends, Lauren Fisher and Dana Robledo, at their after-school soccer practice, under the watchful eyes of their mothers. I introduced myself to the adults who were gathered on the sidelines. When the girls took a break, the mothers called over their daughters and we moved away from the group.

"Tell me what happened," I said.

A month hadn't lessened the horror of seeing their friend struck down. Tears flowed from two pairs of eyes. "We were walking home from school," Lauren said, her voice breaking.

"Do we really have to do this?" Mrs. Robledo said with a frown as Dana sniffed and wiped her eyes.

Mrs. Fisher was having second thoughts, too. "Lauren had nightmares for weeks. I really don't want her to start up again with those bad dreams. I only agreed to this because Mrs. Gebhardt asked." She sighed. "That poor woman."

"I'll be brief." As gently as possible, I led the girls through the events of that afternoon. Both Lauren and Dana had been interviewed at the scene and again a few days after the fact. They'd been unable to give the police a description of the vehicle. I hoped in the intervening weeks some details may have percolated to the surface.

Dana screwed up her face and told me she thought it was a car, not an SUV. "It wasn't boxy, it was lower. I didn't see the driver or the pass . . ."

"Passenger? There was someone else in the car?" I asked. Maybe a break.

"Yeah." Dana looked surprised, and so did her mother. "There were two people."

"Brown," Lauren said suddenly.

"Brown?" Mrs. Fisher repeated. "You told the policeman you didn't know what color it was."

Lauren looked perplexed. "I know. But when I see it in my head, I see brown."

"You see brown in the bad dreams?" I asked. "Or when you're awake and thinking about it."

"No, not the dreams," Lauren said slowly. "When I'm awake. I think about it a lot. I see it like a movie in my mind. I see a brown car."

Maybe two breaks. "Brown like a penny? Or like hot fudge?"

Lauren shook her head. "Neither. It's . . . like a drink."

"Iced tea?" I suggested. "Cola? Cocoa?"

She shook her head again, considering the images. Then she looked at her mother. "That coffee Mom drinks. With chocolate and whipped cream on top."

"Caffè mocha," Mrs. Fisher said.

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I pictured the concoction of espresso, chocolate syrup, and steamed milk. "When you see the brown car in your mind, is there anything else you notice?"

Lauren closed her eyes and pursed her mouth. "Something green, hanging from the rearview mirror."

"Tassels from a graduation cap?" I asked. "Plush dice? A little teddy bear?"

"More like a piece of cloth."

Three breaks, I thought. Details had indeed come to the surface. Lauren recalled a brown vehicle, possibly a car, with something green, possibly cloth, dangling from the rearview mirror. Dana thought there were two people in the vehicle. Memory is notoriously unreliable, but I'd take whatever leads came my way.

I handed out business cards and asked the girls and their mothers to call if any other bits of information surfaced. Then I headed back to my office in Oakland and downloaded the images on my digital camera to my computer. I looked at the shot of Peggy Blaine's red SUV and wondered if she had access to a brown car. But had the vehicle that struck Emily actually been brown?

The Alameda detective I'd spoken with shared the information that Emily's clothes and skin bore physical evidence, from the vehicle that struck her and from the pavement where she landed. Minute paint chips—blue, green, silver, and black. But no brown, not even gold or bronze. There had been rust and primer, and bits of glass, probably from a smashed headlight. And dirt—street grit from the pavement, mixed with bits of asphalt, a few clots of dried mud, and dust, the kind that collects on a car that hasn't been washed in a while. Had the hit-and-run vehicle been so covered in dirt that it looked brown? I pictured a blue car with an overlay of road dust, wondering if it would look the same brown as a caffè mocha. No, I didn't think so. Nor green, nor silver. Black? Maybe.

Peggy Blaine's reaction to Emily Gebhardt's memorial waved a red flag. I started a background check. By the next day I had a clearer picture of the woman who lived in the house on the corner.

Margaret Blaine, age forty-four, had been divorced from Ralph Blaine for nearly four years. Her ex lived in San Diego. In the settlement, she got the Grand Street house and custody of the couple's only child, a son named Charles, now nineteen. She had a good credit rating and a job in the human resources department of a large bank in San Francisco. She'd bought the maroon SUV two years earlier. There was no hint of a brown car in her present, or her immediate past.

During our confrontation the day before, Blaine implied the For Sale sign in front of her house was new. When I called a friend who worked in real estate, I discovered that the house went on the market the week after Emily Gebhardt's death.

"Lookers but no takers," my friend told me. "The housing market's slow right now. The house needs work. The agent told Blaine

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it would make more sense to wait, replace the carpet, spiff up the kitchen and bathrooms, then put the house on the market later this spring. But Blaine insists she has to sell right now. For someone who's in a hurry to move, she's asking too much. If she's selling 'as is' she needs to drop her price."

Why did Peggy Blaine need to sell her house right now? My background check didn't reveal any financial difficulties. Was there something she wanted to get away from?

There were no databases to tell me whether Peggy Blaine had been at work the day Emily Gebhardt died, but I could gather information with phone calls directed to the right places. That's when my theory about her involvement went awry. She'd been in a workshop with a group of other bank employees.

Scratch that theory. Still . . . Why was the woman so testy about Emily's shrine? It had to be more than the candles on the corner.

According to Fred Sutton, Charles Blaine lived at home and commuted to San Francisco State University. My databases had no evidence that he owned a car. Either he used his mother's SUV or took public transit, probably both. I logged on to the university's Web site and checked the academic calendar. Spring break at SFSU coincided with the week Emily died.

Had Charles been somehow involved? That was a stretch. I had nothing to go on, except speculation—and his mother's behavior.

Carol Gebhardt admitted me to the bungalow where the Gebhardts lived, half a block from the corner where their daughter died. Both husband and wife worked in Alameda. Carol was an administrative assistant at a real-estate office. Steve owned a dry-cleaning shop. It was late afternoon and they'd just gotten home from work.

The living room was full of photographs, Emily captured in frames. On the mantel I saw her wearing a pink party dress and a wrist corsage of yellow flowers, in her soccer uniform with her arms around Dana and Lauren, all three Gebhardts in front of a Christmas tree wearing Santa hats and silly grins. More photos crowded the table next to me—the Gebhardts hiking in Yosemite, fishing in a tumbling mountain river, putting up a tent at a campsite. One snapshot caught my eye, Emily and her father on a hunting trip. Steve Gebhardt carried a rifle and his daughter proudly displayed the pheasant he'd shot.

My clients showed two different faces of grief. Carol sat motionless, hands folded on her lap, dark circles around her eyes, as though her daughter's death had sucked all the life from her. Steve couldn't sit still. His hand slapped his knee in an agitated rhythm, his eyes flashed with anger.

"How are you holding up?" I asked.

Carol's voice was dull. "Managing, just barely. It's so hard. I took a couple of weeks off work. Everyone is understanding and sup-

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portive. But I have trouble getting through the day. Trouble sleeping. I think of Emily all the time. The grief counseling helps, but . . . I need closure, I guess. Maybe if you can help us find out who . . ."

Steve's rage erupted. "I want to get my hands on the son of a bitch that did this." He slammed his hand down on the arm of his chair. Carol winced. "Hit a little girl on the street and run away. What kind of scum-sucking toad does that? I can't get my mind around it. Grief counseling, hell, I'm going for Carol's sake. But damn it, I want to find out who killed my little girl. I want justice for Emily. That's the only kind of closure that will work for me. Whoever did this to my baby has got to pay." Tears streamed from his eyes. "Why? Why did this happen? My baby girl. She was all we had."

Carol wept, with deep, wrenching sobs that finally subsided. Steve put his hands over his face and his shoulders shuddered. I felt awkward, unable to help, as though my presence made the pain worse. When they'd hired me, they'd insisted on regular progress reports. That's why I was here. I waited until they were more composed, then I told them I'd talked with Emily's friends and had some leads, without providing details. I suspected Steve might take it upon himself to help me investigate. I didn't want him looking over my shoulder while I was doing my job.

Carol looked wrung out, as though she had no more tears. She took a deep breath and let it out in a sigh, then thanked me for coming over. We rose from our chairs. Carol went to the kitchen and returned with two bouquets of colorful spring flowers. On the floor near the fireplace was a flat-bottomed canvas tote bag. I picked it up, surprised at how heavy it was. I looked inside and saw big round pillar candles, pink and yellow, six of each color.

"I'll take that." Steve reached for the bag. Carol cradled the bouquets in her arms as we left the house. I watched them trudge slowly toward the corner where Emily died.

Saturday afternoon I was working on another case, parked outside an apartment building on Alameda's west end. My cell phone rang. I flipped it open. "Jeri Howard."

"Hi, this is Lauren Fisher. I hope it's okay that I called. You gave me your card, remember?"

"I remember. It's okay. Why did you call?"

"I saw this car," she said. "It's not brown. Not even close. But there's something about it . . ." Her voice trailed off.

"Where are you, Lauren?" I heard people talking in the background.

"Mom and I are in the Starbucks on Park Street."

"I'm on my way." I started my car and headed for downtown Alameda. The parking gods were good to me. As I neared my destination, a car vacated a space. I slipped mine into the spot, got out, and fed coins into the meter.

Caffeine Corner is what I call the intersection of Park Street and

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Central Avenue, with three coffeehouses cheek-by-jowl—Peet's on one corner, Starbucks on the opposite corner, and nearby, a local establishment called Java Rama. It was a sunny Saturday afternoon. Tables and chairs outside all three places were full of people getting their caffeine fix. The Fishers were inside Starbucks, seated near the front window. Mrs. Fisher nursed a caffè mocha with whipped cream on top. Lauren drank lemonade through a straw as she peered anxiously through the window.

"It's probably nothing," Mrs. Fisher said when I joined them inside. "But she insisted on calling you."

"I like to play the hunches. Where did you see the car?"

"Down the street." Lauren pointed. "It's still there, in front of the bookstore."

"It's purple," Mrs. Fisher said.

"It certainly is." The car stood out like the proverbial sore thumb, with a paint job in a color that resembled grape soda. If this was the car Lauren had seen hit Emily, it hadn't been purple at the time. Surely she and the other witnesses would have remembered such a distinctive color.

"Lauren, you said there was something about the car. What do you mean?"

Lauren sucked on the straw. "Maybe it's the shape. Maybe it's because there's two people in it. We were at the bookstore. When that car backed into the parking space, I said, Mom, look at that weird color. Then I looked again and the car seemed familiar. That green thing is hanging from the rearview mirror, just like what I saw."

"It looks like an Oakland A's pennant," Mrs. Fisher said. "Pretty vague hunch."

"Who knows? I'll take a look at the car."

I left the coffeehouse and walked toward the purple car. It was a mix of designs, its hood sleek and streamlined in front like a car, the hatchback at the rear square and boxy like an SUV. The green cloth hanging from the rearview mirror was indeed a small pennant bearing the logo of the Oakland A's baseball team.

According to the police, the hit-and-run vehicle probably had front-end damage—the left front fender, bumper, and grille—and a broken headlight as well. If this was the car, any dents and breakage left by the impact had long since been repaired. But sometimes repairs left evidence. I stepped off the sidewalk, between vehicles, peering at oncoming traffic as though I were going to jaywalk across Park Street. I shaded my eyes with my hand and glanced down at the purple car. I didn't see anything that looked like a dent that had been hammered out. But the left headlight and rim looked newer than the right.

As I expected, the steady stream of cars prevented me from having to actually jaywalk. I walked slowly along the left side of the car, gazing at traffic and surreptitiously examining the car. I saw an area on the left front fender that could have been crumpled. It

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wasn't as smooth as the rest of the car's body. There was a small rectangular sticker affixed to the lower left windshield, but the angle of the sun created a glare and I couldn't read it.

When I reached the back end of the car, I saw another sticker, this one on the rear bumper, with the familiar name of a big insurance company. I stood there long enough to memorize the California license-plate number, then shrugged as though I'd given up the idea of jaywalking. I stepped back onto the sidewalk and into the bookstore's doorway, where I pulled pen and notebook from my purse and wrote down the plate number, make, and model of the purple car.

When no one approached, I left the doorway and strolled toward the car again. When I reached the front, I unzipped my purse and dropped it between the purple car and the one in front of it, intentionally spilling several items from the purse to the gutter. I stepped off the curb and used my foot to nudge my sunglasses case under the purple car, near the left front wheel.

"Oh, damn," I said, feigning exasperation as I knelt to retrieve the items I'd dumped. Then I got down on my hands and knees for a look at the purple car's undercarriage.

Two sets of sandal-shod feet appeared, on either side of me. I looked up at a young man and a young woman who evidently went with the car. They looked at me with alarm.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I dropped my purse. A bunch of stuff spilled out. What a pain. My glasses case went under this car. Now where did it go?" I stretched my body under the car and took another look. "There it is, over by the tire. Got it." I backed out and scrambled to my feet, brandishing the case. Then I tucked it into my purse and brushed dust from my clothes. "Yuck. What a mess."

I headed for the bookstore, plucked a hardback from a table near the front window, and pretended to read while I catalogued what I'd seen. Tiny droplets of purple paint on the undercarriage told me the car had recently been painted. The spot I'd seen on the left front fender had definitely been crumpled, then hammered out, and right at the bottom, black finish showed through the purple paint. Would a black car with an overlay of dirt look brown? I thought so.

I glanced over the top of the book. The two people I'd just encountered stood in front of the purple car, heads close together as they talked. They were in their late teens, similarly attired in shorts and shirts. He was medium height, with a mop of sandy brown hair. She was short, with long black hair and a slender figure. He unlocked the driver's-side door, slid into the seat, and started the engine as she got into the passenger seat.

I dropped the book and left the bookstore, heading for the nearby crosswalk. The walk signal flashed green and I hurried across Park Street as the young man angled the purple car into the traffic lane. I ran up the sidewalk on the other side of the street, dodging pedes-

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trians. The purple car and I reached the intersection of Park Street and Central Avenue just as the signal turned yellow. The driver gunned the engine and the car sped through as the light turned red.

My car was just around the corner. I had the green light so I made a left from Central onto Park, and managed to catch up with the purple car, keeping a few car lengths back. Then the purple car made a left onto Lincoln Avenue, just as the traffic signal changed from yellow to red. I was stuck, no chance of following.

I had the plate number. Soon I'd have a name and an address to go with it.

Fred Sutton had told me he and his dog Aggie walked every afternoon, usually along the beach. I parked my car near the end of Grand Street and walked across Shoreline Drive to the paved path that paralleled the wide sandy beach. Next to the path the low dunes were planted with wildflowers and sea grass, and beyond that, I saw driftwood piled on the sand. Wind ruffled the surface of the bay. In the blue sky above me, seagulls wheeled and cried. As I strolled along the path I saw in the distance the Bay Bridge and the tightly packed cluster of buildings that was San Francisco.

Suddenly I got a prickly feeling between my shoulder blades, as though someone was watching me. I turned slowly, scanning street, path, and beach, my guard up. Then I saw Fred Sutton and his dog Aggie walking toward me. I quickened my pace to catch up with them. When I scratched Aggie's ears, she responded with pleasurable groans and a wagging tail.

"The week the little girl got killed was spring break at SF State," I said. "Was Charles Blaine home that week?"

Fred rubbed his chin. "He went camping. The Saturday before the little girl got hit I saw him and some other kids packing up some gear. I stopped to say hello. Charlie said they were going camping. Don't know when they got back, but I didn't see Charlie again till Friday of that week."

Which was two days after the hit-and-run vehicle ended Emily Gebhardt's life. "What do you remember about his friends?" I asked. "How many people were there? And what were they driving?"

"Three guys and three girls," Fred said. "They were packing the camping gear into an SUV and a black car, what I'd call a roadster."

That sounded like the car I'd seen on Park Street, the one that had recently been painted purple. "Does Charlie have a girlfriend?"

"Oh, yeah, since high school. Anita, I think her name is. She's a pretty little girl with long dark hair. Come to think of it, she drives that black car."

"Have you seen her lately?"

"She was at Charlie's house this morning. She's gone and painted that car the damndest shade of purple."

"The car was black last month and now it's purple. I wonder why."

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Fred frowned. "I get your drift. You think Charlie and his girlfriend had something to do with that hit-and-run?"

"Maybe. I'm using some random pieces to assemble the puzzle."

"That might explain why Peggy's had such a burr under her saddle these past few weeks," he said. "I hope you're wrong."

"If I'm not?"

"They need to face the music."

I left Fred and Aggie and walked back toward my car. The prickly feeling was still there. Was someone watching me? I considered the possibilities. Peggy Blaine? Had the two young people in the purple car—Charles Blaine and his girlfriend Anita—turned the tables on me? Or was Steve Gebhardt looking over my shoulder, as I'd feared he might?

Gebhardt's dry-cleaning and tailoring shop was on Lincoln Avenue near downtown Alameda. The woman at the counter was middle-aged and talkative, which suited me just fine. She shook her head when I asked to see her boss. "I'm sorry, he's not here. Can I help you?"

"No, my business is with him. I've been trying to catch him, but I keep missing him here at the store."

"He hasn't been in much lately," the clerk confided.

As far as Carol Gebhardt knew, her husband had been going to work every morning. So where was Steve Gebhardt when he wasn't at his store, particularly on a busy Saturday afternoon?

"Poor Mr. Gebhardt," the clerk went on. "He and his wife suffered a terrible loss. Their little girl was killed by a hit-and-run driver, about a month ago."

"I know. He's taking it hard."

"He's devastated. Who wouldn't be? How do you get over something like that?" She shuddered. "I can't imagine what I'd do if I lost one of my kids, especially that way."

"People have different ways of coping. Some cry, others get angry."

"Mr. Gebhardt is angry. He talks about what he'll do if he ever catches up with the driver of that car. Normally he's the nicest, most even-tempered man. But he hasn't been himself since it happened. Poor man. I'm really concerned about him. Not that I think he'd actually do anything. It's just talk. Maybe it will help get him through this difficult time . . ." Her voice trailed off.

Would Steve Gebhardt actually do something if I did what he and Carol had hired me to do—find out who drove the car that killed his daughter? Gebhardt wasn't in his store. That didn't prove he'd been following me. I recalled the photo I'd seen at the Gebhardts' house, of Steve and his daughter on a hunting trip. I took the precaution of finding out what guns were registered to Steve. He had a hunting rifle and a shotgun, but no handgun. But handguns were easy to get.

By the following week I'd learned that the purple car was registered to Lewis Montano, who lived on Pacific Avenue in Alameda's

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west end. He'd purchased the car new five years earlier and the vehicle was black when it left the dealer's lot.

When I drove past the house on Thursday afternoon, a white sedan was parked in the driveway but the purple car was nowhere in sight. I left my own car at the end of the block and knocked on a few doors. I found stay-at-home moms and retired couples, and gleaned some information about the Montanos. They had three children, all living at home. The oldest, Anita, had graduated from Encinal High School two years earlier. She was in college but no one was sure where.

I was walking toward my car when the purple car whipped around the corner, moving fast. The young woman I'd seen the previous Saturday was at the wheel. Anita Montano—I assumed that's who she was—zoomed past me and parked at the curb in front of the Montano house. She got out of the car, carrying a backpack, and went inside the house. The living-room curtains were closed. I stopped when I reached the purple car. Piled in the passenger seat were an assortment of magazines and mail-order catalogs, an open box of granola bars, a program from a basketball game, and a student newspaper from Chabot College in Hayward.

I walked around to the driver's side, for a closer look at the sticker on the lower left corner of the windshield. It was printed with the name, address, and phone number of a repair shop in Oakland. A date had been written on a line that said "Last Service." The car had been in the shop the Monday after the hit-and-run.

I moved away from the car and walked toward my own, just as the front door of the Montano house opened. Anita came out, minus the backpack. I didn't think she'd seen me. She walked straight for the purple car, got in, and drove away.

I drove to Oakland and located the repair shop, telling the owner I was following up on the Montanos' insurance claim. Yes, his crew had worked on the car for several days, doing a tune-up and an oil change in addition to repairs and a paint job. He frowned when I asked him what the Montanos told him about how the car got damaged. "You should know that, if you're investigating the claim."

"Just want to see if the girl's story matches with what her father told me."

"Mr. Montano is a straight-up guy. He wouldn't lie about something like that."

Montano might not have lied, but I wasn't sure about his daughter's veracity. I shrugged. "I'm just doing my job. He wasn't driving when the accident happened, right?"

"No, his daughter was driving. She was camping with some friends, had the car off-road and ran into a rock. Must have been a big one. There was a lot of damage. Crumpled left front fender and a broken headlight. I had to replace the rim, too."

"Why did the Montanos paint the car purple?"

"I know the paint job is over and above what you'd authorize for

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repairs. After we fixed the fender and headlight, we were going to touch up the black paint, but the girl wanted purple, her favorite color. Mr. Montano said to go ahead. Wouldn't have been my choice. Looks like grape soda."

"Thanks for your help."

I went back to my office. The Chabot College Web site confirmed the dates of the college's spring break—the week Emily Gebhardt died. Anita's story about the car hitting a rock was plausible. I made some phone calls. Lewis Montano told his insurance company the same story he'd told the repair shop. Anita hadn't reported the accident to anyone. She said she didn't think the damage was that bad until she got home and her father saw it.

Maybe. The insurance agent heard similar stories, day in and day out. Besides, he knew Lewis Montano and was willing to accept the story at face value.

But why paint the car purple? Disguise? Camouflage? No one was looking for a purple car with no visible front-end damage.

I considered a couple of scenarios, assuming the purple car was the hit-and-run vehicle. Anita had been driving the car and she'd lied to her father and the insurance company. But that wouldn't explain why Peggy Blaine was upset about the memorial to Emily on the corner, so upset she was ready to sell her house. What if her son Charlie had been driving the car? What if Anita was covering for him, out of love or mistaken loyalty. Or was it the other way around?

I staked out the Montano house on Pacific Avenue. Late Saturday afternoon Anita drove the purple car to Grand Street. She honked her horn twice. Charlie Blaine left his mother's house and hopped into the passenger seat. They drove downtown, parked on Santa Clara Avenue, and walked to a Japanese restaurant. When they finished dinner I was waiting for them at the purple car, my business card in my outstretched hand.

Charlie stared at the print on the card. His eyes widened. "You're that private eye my mom told me about."

"Yes. I know about the hit-and-run. Either you go to the police, or I will."

Anita started crying. Charlie's face crumpled. "It was an accident," he said.

"Yes, it was. But someone died. Tell me how it happened."

They'd had a fight while on the camping trip. They'd decided to leave their friends at the state park up in Sonoma County and go back to Alameda, arguing all the way. Charlie drove Anita's car that afternoon. He was speeding, as he often did, but he'd never been caught. He had a lead foot when he was distracted. And he had been distracted. He and Anita had been yelling at each other as he sped down Grand Street.

"You've got to believe me," he said. "I didn't see the little girl. I didn't know I'd hit her until I heard the thump."

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"But you kept going."

"I panicked," he wailed.

"We both did." Words poured from Anita's mouth as though she'd kept them back too long. "We didn't know what to do. So we ran. I told my dad I drove the car into a big rock at the campground. He bought it. We got the car fixed and painted."

"And your mother put her house on the market," I told Charlie. "She thought you could run away from this. But that shrine on the corner is a daily reminder. You know what you have to do, both of you. You go to the police, or I will."

He ran his hands through his sandy hair. "I've got to talk to my mom. Let me talk to her first."

Anita took out her cell phone and called her father, asking him to meet her at the Blaine house. I followed the purple car as Anita drove slowly back to Grand Street and parked in the driveway, behind Peggy Blaine's maroon SUV. Then the white sedan I'd seen at the Montanos' house pulled up to the curb. An older man got out and walked to where I stood with Charlie and Anita, on the sidewalk leading up to the porch. Anita threw her arms around him, sobbing into his shoulder.

He looked alarmed as he patted her on the back. "What's wrong, honey?"

Peggy Blaine opened her front door, stepped out on the porch, and glared at me like a mother lion defending her cub. "You. What are you doing here? Get off my property. Leave my son alone."

I directed my words to Charlie and Anita. "I'll give you fifteen minutes."

They went into the house and shut the door. I retreated to the corner where Emily's shrine stood, with burned-out candles and flowers wilting in buckets. When I looked up, I saw Carol and Steve Gebhardt exit their house in the middle of the block, heading this way. Steve carried the tote bag with its heavy pillar candles and Carol held a large colorful bouquet, ready to perform their evening ritual of lighting candles and putting out fresh flowers in memory of their daughter.

"Hello, Jeri," Carol said when they reached the corner. "I called and left a message at your office. Are you making any progress?"

"Some," I said. "Is that why you called?"

"Not exactly," Carol said. "It's the woman who lives here." She pointed at Peggy Blaine's front porch. "I'm afraid she doesn't like us putting out flowers and candles for Emily. Last night she came outside and yelled at us to stop. She was very nasty about it."

Trouble. I'd been concerned about a confrontation between the Gebhardts and Peggy Blaine. I had to ward off another one. "Did you respond?"

Steve's mouth tightened. "It was all I could do not to say something. But if she starts in again tonight—"

Carol put a placating hand on his arm. "Just ignore her. She

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doesn't understand. She doesn't know what it's like to lose a child. Maybe if we explain . . ."

"She told me it's because her house is on the market," I said.

Steve stared at the For Sale sign in the yard. "That sign went up the week after Emily died, about the same time someone started messing with Emily's memorial. Did you check her out?"

"I did. She was at work on the day Emily died."

"She has a son, doesn't she? I've seen him. And his girlfriend. In a purple car."

Since the Gebhardts lived nearby, it was possible Steve had seen Charlie and Anita in the purple car. But I suspected he'd been following me. The situation was building an uncomfortable head of steam. I hoped the Gebhardts would finish their evening ritual before anyone came out of the Blaine house. "Let me help you put out the candles and flowers," I said. "Then you can leave. You don't have to see her or talk with her at all."

Steve shook his head. "No, it's something we have to do."

He set the canvas bag that held the candles on the pavement. The umbrella that sheltered the easel was askew, the duct tape fastening it to the broomstick torn. Steve closed the umbrella and tugged the broomstick from the ground, then he pulled a roll of duct tape from the bag. While he replaced the old tape with new, Carol leaned over the vases, carefully removing flowers that were dead or dying, adding fresh flowers from the big bouquet she'd brought. Then she gathered up the burned-out candles and put them in a plastic sack she tugged from her pocket.

Steve plucked two big candles from the canvas bag and handed them to her. She set them on the sidewalk. I glanced at my watch. Ten minutes had passed since Charlie and Anita went into the house. When I looked up I saw Fred Sutton and his dog Aggie come out of the neighboring house where he lived with his daughter. He waved at me.

Then Peggy Blaine's front door opened. She stormed out and down the porch steps, followed by Charlie and the Montanos. She ran toward the corner. "Get out, get out," she screamed, her hands balled into fists, her arms raised.

Carol backed away from the shrine, frightened. She started crying. Steve moved forward, raising his angry voice. "Don't talk to my wife like that."

I got between Steve and Peggy. "Calm down, both of you. This isn't doing any of us any good."

From the corner of my eye I saw Fred Sutton hustling toward us, his dog at his heels. "Peggy, you need to stop this nonsense," he said. "Leave these people alone. They've lost their child and they need to mourn."

"You don't understand," she cried.

But I did.

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Charlie raced across the lawn and grabbed his mother, pinioning her arms. "Mom, please. Don't do this."

She struggled free, whirled, and pushed him away, her voice low, urgent, imploring. I strained to hear what she was saying. "Get away, get away, they'll find out."

Anita reached for Peggy's arm and the older woman slapped the girl. "Look what you've done," Peggy snapped. "It's all your fault. If you hadn't been fighting—"

Anita burst into tears. "It was just an argument, a silly argument. Charlie was distracted."

"It was an accident," Charlie said, his voice anguished as he faced the Gebhardts. "We didn't mean for it to happen."

Sometimes a public confession wasn't a good idea. The situation was too volatile. I pulled out my cell phone and flipped it open, quickly thumbing through the contacts for the number of the Alameda Police Department. I hit the send button and spoke urgently to the voice that answered.

"You killed my little girl." Carol shook like a tree not strong enough to stand up to a hard wind. She fell to her knees. I moved toward her. Then I saw Steve reach into the bag that held the candles. I realized there was another reason the bag was so heavy. Steve's idea of closure was revenge.

"He has a gun," I shouted.

I dropped my cell phone and lunged at Steve, but I was too late. He fired three shots, astonishingly loud. Then it was quiet as death. Steve stood there, the gun in his hand as he stared at the scene. He dropped the gun. He'd done what he intended to do.

Fred had picked up my cell phone from the grass and was talking into the mouthpiece. His dog Aggie barked frantically as he pulled her away. Sirens wailed in the distance and people poured from nearby houses.

Someone started screaming. Anita Montano sat on the grass, her hand touching a crimson wound on her arm, as though she couldn't believe that was her own blood.

She'd gotten off easy. Peggy Blaine and her son Charlie lay crumpled together on their front lawn.

Carol sat on the sidewalk near Emily's shrine as the sirens got closer and finally stopped at the corner. Tears streamed down her face. She kept crying as the paramedics worked on Peggy, Charlie, and Anita. Then I saw one of the EMTs shake his head and pull a sheet over Charlie's face. The EMTs loaded Anita and Peggy into an ambulance.

The police cuffed Steve Gebhardt, put him into the backseat of a cruiser, and drove away, leaving me to follow with the wreckage of his wife. In my head I heard Peggy Blaine's voice saying, as it had the day I met her, "There's such a thing as excessive grief." ●

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Art by Allen Davis

The House That Got Shot

by Barbara Nadel

Inspector Çetin İkmen cast his gaze slowly around the blood-ied, shredded room before him and then, turning to his equally shocked female sergeant, said, "What a mess."

"The whole house is the same, sir," Sergeant Ayşe Farsakoğlu replied. "Bullet holes everywhere."

"Do we know who she was?" İkmen said as he tipped his head in the direction of a blood-soaked body lying face downwards in front of him, its arms outstretched to each side clutching what looked like small lengths of rope.

"Not yet," Ayşe said. "Apart from this house, the rest of the street has been empty for some months. This part of Haskoy is in the process of being redeveloped."

İkmen looked down at the young woman with a cynical eye. As well as working as a police officer in İstanbul for over thirty years, he had lived in the city all his life. He'd seen a lot of metropolitan districts "redevelop"—not always for the better. Haskoy, a somewhat distant

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and rickety suburb on the northern shore of the Golden Horn, was just the latest in a long line of "newly discovered" districts. Once home to a sizeable Jewish as well as a Gypsy population, the little wooden houses of Haskoy had a certain shabby romance to them. Just not this particular one—not anymore.

"Well, whoever the victim was, she was only part of the assailants' target," İkmen said as he put his hand in his pocket and drew out a packet of cigarettes.

"What do you mean by that, sir?" Ayşe replied with a frown.

"Well, it's obvious," İkmen said. "Whoever did this was shooting the house as much as the occupant." Then, after lighting up a cigarette, he moved past the officer on guard at the front door of the property and went outside.

Barbara Nadel was born in London, but she has family in Turkey and has been a regular visitor there for twenty years. Her best-known series, which includes the CWA Silver Dagger winner *Deadly Web*, features Istanbul cop Çetin İkmen, who also stars in this story. *Pretty Dead Things*, the 10th İkmen book, came out in '07 in the U.S.

Over the course of the next few hours, many İstanbul police officials came and went from the house on the corner of Harab Cesme Sokak. Photographers, forensics and ballistics experts, ordinary officers, and, of course, the police pathologist Dr. Arto Sarkissian. The latter, who was a contemporary and old friend of Çetin İkmen, didn't take long to pronounce life extinct.

"What a thing to do to an old woman, eh?" he said when he came out to join İkmen in the street. "I've counted twelve bullet wounds so far and I'm sure I'll find more when I get her over to the lab. Insanity!"

"The whole house is shot to pieces," İkmen said as he looked across at the great wall that surrounded the once busy old synagogue opposite. "She's old, our victim. I wonder if she used to be a congregant over there."

"At the synagogue? Maybe," Arto shrugged. "The few Jews that remain around here do tend to be old. But whatever she may have been, one thing is for sure: This murder will not do the redevelopment around here much good. Especially if you add in our victim's slithery comrades and the possibility that they in turn may have more family somewhere nearby."

İkmen turned his dry, thin face towards the rather more robust visage of his plump Armenian friend and said, "Slithery comrades?"

"The old woman was not the only living creature to die in that orgy of bullets." Arto paused to swallow rather nervously before he said, "She kept, indeed it would appear she was on friendly terms with, snakes."

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"Snakes!"

"Two—so far," the doctor replied. "One in each hand. From the way that she fell it would seem that she was holding them up and out to both sides of her body when she was shot. I know that you hate them, but . . . "

"Snakes! What kind of snakes?" İkmen asked as sweat began to appear visibly on his face.

"I don't know. I'm not a zoologist," the doctor replied. "Small, indeterminate serpents, now deceased."

"Happily."

"Depends upon your point of view," Arto continued. "Our victim, it would seem, was quite at ease handling them."

"That or she was preparing to throw them at her assailant," İkmen said.

"Either way, she had the snakes for some reason and had to be comfortable with that," Arto replied. "I've told all of our people to be careful in case other slithery friends make unexpected appearances."

İkmen looked down instinctively at his own feet and then, anxiously, scanned the street to his left and right. Harab Cesme Sokak was a steep road that, as well as incorporating an elderly synagogue, also boasted a long row of wooden Ottoman houses amongst its treasures. What had been the last inhabited example of this type of property was İkmen's murder scene. It was also, he now knew, a possible source of snakes. Just the thought of snakes made him shudder. It was a phobia he had developed a long time ago. It was not one he had any interest in addressing now. He and snakes just did not meet—ever.

"Sir!"

A young man in a well-ironed blue uniform snapped to attention in front of İkmen.

"Constable Yıldız?"

"Sir, I've just been talking to the owner of the grocer's shop at the top of the hill."

Just as probably buying sweets as cigarettes, İkmen thought. Although not in reality *that* young, Hikmet Yıldız with his baby face and his perfect shirts so obviously ironed by his sweet little headscarfed mother was one of those boys who was taking a very long time to grow up. "Yes? And?"

"Kemal Bey, the grocer, he says that all of this block of houses here has been bought by a foreigner," the young man said.

"Does he?"

"Yes. Apparently, sir, all the occupants except the dead lady moved out when this new owner took possession about six months ago. I told him nothing, but of course like the whole district he has been watching us come and go here for hours. Kemal Bey of his own volition told me the dead lady's name. It was Ofis Hanım. Unusual name, isn't it?" he said as he looked at the Armenian for some possible explanation.

But Arto Sarkissian just shrugged. "It means nothing to me,

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Constable," he said. "Did Kemal Bey tell you anything else about the lady?"

"Only that she almost never went out. Kemal Bey's son was in the habit of delivering groceries to Ofis Hanım's home once a week. But they never conversed. All Kemal Bey said was that a third party, another woman of the district, told him that Ofis Hanım did not, unlike her neighbours, have any intention of moving."

"I don't suppose that Kemal Bey said anything about snakes, did he?" İkmen asked.

The young officer frowned. "Snakes? No. Why?"

İkmen looked across at Arto Sarkissian before he said, "Because, Constable, it would seem that Ofis Hanım had a particular liking for snakes. I do hope that your boots are securely laced."

Constable Yıldız, wide-eyed with horror, looked down at his mercifully snake-free feet and said, "Allah!"

The following day brought further information about Ofis Hanım, although not, as yet, any actual suspect for her murder. In view of the fact that so many bullets had been found both in the old woman and in the fabric of the house, İkmen was surprised to learn that the weapon involved had been nothing more lethal or sophisticated than an ordinary shotgun.

"I would have thought that if whoever did this did so with the intention of wrecking the place, he would have saved himself a lot of effort and used a submachine gun," İkmen said to Ayşe Farsakoğlu as he looked down at the ballistics report on his desk.

"Depends what he was firing at, sir," the young woman replied.

"In spite of the fact that most of the residents of Haskoy are now obsessed by visions of murderous serpents, we have still only recovered the bodies of two snakes—neither of which was in the least bit dangerous."

"Nonvenomous whip snakes," Ayşe said.

"Our assailant killed them and Ofis Hanım. Shot up the house maybe imagining more snakes . . ."

"It's possible. I mean, we, or rather I, had never heard of nonvenomous Cypriot whip snakes until Forensics got back to us. Perhaps the killer thought that they were poisonous."

"Mmm." İkmen offered Ayşe a cigarette before lighting up himself and then said, "But to go to that house armed with a shotgun . . . Ofis Hanım was a small, frail old lady. If somebody wanted to kill her all he needed to do was push her over."

"Assuming our assailant was a man," Ayşe said as she puffed delicately on the rough Maltepe cigarette her superior had just given her.

"Indeed."

"Yes."

"But male or female, the fact remains that someone killed Ofis Hanım and her snakes and wrecked her house," İkmen said. "Why?"

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"Maybe Mr. Lukash, the owner of that side of Harab Cesme Sokak, will be able to tell us," Ayşe replied. "He and his wife are coming in at three."

"Maybe he will," İkmen replied. "And in the absence of any other motive, Mr. Lukash's property empire, or rather, Ofis Hanım's effect upon it, does put our Ukrainian friend in the frame. All of the other old residents moved away very quickly when he came into possession of that street."

"Redevelopment," Ayşe said sadly, "is not without its casualties."

"No." İkmen sighed. "And some of it is very good, but . . . If only gangsters were not involved . . . "

"We don't know that Mr. Lukash is a gangster, sir. I know a lot of people here equate people like him, from the former Soviet Union, with gang activity, but the two don't always go together. Besides, his wife is Turkish, from here in the city."

"Mmm," İkmen looked down at his desk gloomily. "I expect she's covered with gold chains and plastic-surgery scars. They like their women like that."

"Who do?"

He looked up into a face that was taut with anger.

"Who like their women 'like that'?" Ayşe reiterated. "Gangsters? Eastern Europeans? Or are gangsters always Eastern Europeans or . . . "

"Ayşe, don't be angry . . . "

"Why are you behaving just like the lowest, most prejudiced moron in the coffeehouse? Sir, you are better than that!" she said passionately. "You, of all people, know that you cannot judge anyone just on face value! You taught me that! You drummed that into my head from my very first day!"

İkmen rubbed a tired hand over his thin, middle-aged features. Ayşe was right, of course. He was fifty-seven years old, he'd been in the police force for over thirty of those, and he was both a father nine times over and a grandfather. He'd seen a lot—enough to know that there was no "type" more able to commit murder than any other. Just because a man wore big chunky rings and a leather coat didn't make him a villain. Not necessarily.

"I apologise," he said, shaking his head miserably as he did so. "It's just that I've seen so much 'redevelopment' in my lifetime—so much of it to the detriment of this city and its people—in my opinion. You know what I mean, Ayşe. Great roads pushed relentlessly into once comfortable and tight-knit old communities, great big apartment buildings constructed on the foundations of once elegant Ottoman houses . . . "

"Not all of those developments have been done by Eastern Europeans," Ayşe said. "In fact, I think that very few properties have actually passed into foreign hands. And besides, sir, not everything that has been redeveloped has been bad. I mean, some of the

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neighbourhoods that have undergone extensive redevelopment are actually better now than they were before. People who live there have a far superior quality of life."

"I know." İkmen nodded. "But the fact that everyone except Ofis Hanım moved out as soon as Mr. Lukash bought those houses doesn't sit well with me. That area was poor. Where did all those poor people go?"

"We can find out," Ayşe said.

"Then that is what we must do," İkmen replied. "Find them. Talk to them."

"Yes, sir."

He looked up and smiled. "You know one place that has improved a lot in recent years?" he said. "Gulhane Park."

Ayşe knew the green and very pleasant park to the western side of the Topkapı Palace well. It was a nice relaxed place where she and her friends would sometimes go to walk about and eat ice cream on sunny weekend afternoons.

"When I was young, it was called Lunar Park," İkmen continued. "There was a sort of a fair there with cheap attractions; freak shows, grisly things. It was all swept away a long time ago."

"For the better, by the sound of it," Ayşe said.

"Certainly for the better," İkmen replied firmly. "Most certainly."

Mrs. Lukash had, it turned out, not disappointed. Or rather, her appearance had not. She had been just as İkmen imagined she would be—all bleached-blond hair and false breasts. Her almost totally silent Ukranian husband had, however, been quite another matter. Old and world-weary looking, the most significant thing he'd said, in his very halting Turkish, was that he did not and had never owned Ofis Hanım's house. Unlike the other houses that Lukash had bought from the previous owner, a local man called Ali Koray, Ofis Hanım had owned her house and had not wanted to sell. İkmen took good note of this fact and, once the Lukashes had gone, instructed Ayşe to look into the Ukranian's affairs. Ofis Hanım's house, he felt, had to have been a considerable thorn in the side of a man who was in the process, he said, of developing an elegant and valuable row of refitted houses.

Now, however, he was in the cramped and messy Haskoy office of Mr. Ali Koray. On the basis that the landlord might have known Ofis Hanım, and wishing to find out rather more about his dealings with Mr. Lukash, İkmen now sat before a very battered desk behind which sat a short, thin man of about fifty.

"So you don't know where your old tenants went to after Mr. Lukash bought your property?" İkmen asked as he lit up a cigarette.

"No, not really." Mr. Koray shrugged in what appeared to be a very offhand manner. "I've seen one or two about. In local shops and . . . But no. I sold to Lukash, I will be honest with you, because I was sick of the whole landlord business. All the tenants ever did

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was complain! It was like living in a headache!"

"Mr. Lukash gave you a good price?"

"Yes. He's redeveloping the houses. They look nice. I could never have afforded to do such a thing."

"Did the tenants know that their houses were going to be redeveloped for sale?" İkmen said.

Mr. Koray shrugged again. It seemed to be some sort of habit. "I told them, yes. But I don't know whether they left or Lukash made them leave or what. Some were upset. But I needed the money and they, the tenants, they knew they'd have to go sometime."

Yes," İkmen attempted a smile but then gave up. He'd met uncaring landlords before. It didn't get any easier. "I imagine Mr. Lukash can't have been happy that he couldn't buy all the houses in the row."

"I don't know . . . "

"Ofis Hanım . . . "

"Oh, that shooting? Terrible business! Just awful!" Mr. Koray shook his head violently at the thought of it.

"Did you know her?" İkmen asked.

Once again, Koray gave a shrug. "Not really."

"Strange that you owned all of the houses in the row except that belonging to Ofis Hanım. Mr. Lukash's wife told us that her understanding was that you had inherited the row from your father. You have to know the area and its people well."

There was a pause, then Ali Koray smiled. "Ah," he said. "Mmm." He looked up at İkmen with his great wrinkle-wreathed eyes and said, "Look, Inspector, the old woman, Ofis, she was, well, she was my father's mistress. A long time ago. He gave her that house and . . . "

"I see."

"But since he died, back in nineteen eighty-eight, my family and I, well, we have left Ofis Hanım alone. My mother still lives. It is, was, embarrassing."

"You or your family didn't try to buy the property back from Ofis Hanım?"

"No." He shrugged. "What would have been the point?"

"To make more money from Mr. Lukash."

He smiled. "I made plenty of money from Mr. Lukash." He then looked, with what İkmen felt could not possibly be genuine pride, around his very small and shabby office. "I am content."

That evening, instead of going straight home to the İkmen family apartment in Sultanahmet, the inspector went to a bar in the nearby district of Cankurtaran. In the lee of one of the walls of the great Topkapı Palace, the little bar where he met up with his friend Dr. Arto Sarkissian was very basic, very local, and almost empty. Just the way both İkmen and the doctor liked it.

Sitting at a rough table outside the bar, İkmen drank his beer with pleasure as he watched the sun begin to set behind a group of young

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children playing in the street. If he ignored the endless stream of traffic passing along Ishakpasa Caddesi, cutting through to the main coastal road, Kennedy Caddesi, he could almost imagine that he was back in the nineteen seventies. The little unnamed bar they were sitting in front of certainly looked as if it came from that era, as did the innocent game of chase that the children were playing. Not a games console or item of designer clothing to be seen. Not that going back to the 'seventies, even were that possible, was without its drawbacks.

"I'd far rather go back to the nineteen fifties, myself," Arto said as he drank his Coca-Cola straight from the bottle. "There was so much political unrest in the 'seventies. The 'fifties were a lot, I suppose, simpler."

"Yes." İkmen, who could also all too vividly recall the battles that had raged between the various left- and right-wing political factions in the nineteen seventies, hadn't forgotten that either. He'd had to try and control some of it when he was a young constable. "But the trouble with the 'fifties, Arto, is that they were so primitive."

"Primitive?"

"Yes!" İkmen lit up a cigarette. "Some parts of the city were so poor it was almost as if they were monochrome. Everyone wore the same dull clothes, in winter you choked on the fog from everyone's fires. In the summer, the sewers stank."

"Oh, yes, well . . . "

"And on top of that, we had to endure abominations just up the road here!"

Arto Sarkissian frowned.

"Lunar Park," İkmen said. "I was telling my sergeant about it earlier today. I said that since it became Gulhane Park it has improved enormously. One piece of good redevelopment, if you ask me."

The doctor sat back in his chair and smiled. "Oh, I liked Lunar Park," he said. "It was quirky."

İkmen scowled. "Oh, yes," he said, "full of deformed dwarves, women with beards, cheap, boring little sideshows . . . "

"And of course, snakes," his friend said as he watched İkmen's reaction to this out of the corner of his eye.

The policeman reddened. "Well . . . "

"Even now, even when I told you about the dead snakes we found in the hands of the old woman in Haskoy, it got to you, didn't it?"

İkmen let his head drop a little. "Yes."

"Çetin, the Lunar Park snake pit was just a hole filled with non-poisonous snakes. It was a silly attraction long since . . . "

"It was a horrible, writhing mass of ghastly serpents with a girl in the middle of it!"

"Whom you tried to 'rescue,' yes," Arto said.

"I thought they were going to kill her. I put my hand down to her and they all slithered up my arm!" İkmen shuddered.

"While everyone else laughed because the girl was meant to be

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there. The Slave of the Snakes was part of the attraction."

"I was eleven, my mother had been dead for just six months, and I couldn't look at death anymore. I just couldn't!"

Arto Sarkissian, noting the tears that had welled up in his friend's eyes, reached across the table and took one of his hands. "I know. I'm sorry."

He hadn't been in Lunar Park with Çetin when the Snake Pit incident occurred. Çetin's brother Halil had told him about it and, at the time, they had both had a good laugh at the strange antics of the younger boy. Until the early nineteen sixties there had indeed been what amounted to a freak show in the shadow of the Topkapı Palace. One of the "attractions" had been a pit, lined with red silk, wherein lay a rather voluptuous woman who allowed herself to be writhed over by many nonvenomous snakes. In the habit, sometimes, of writhing in time to the movements of her snakes, the so-called "Slave of the Snakes" looked to the eleven-year-old Çetin İkmen as if she was being attacked. By reaching down to her he had only been trying to save her. But the effect that it had was to make the woman and the man who owned the pit angry, cause the mainly gruff male spectators to laugh, and give the snakes someone new and exciting to slither onto. It had also left Çetin with an almost hysterical fear of snakes.

Çetin looked up at Arto and smiled. "I'm sorry," he said. "I overreact where 'they,' our legless, eyelid-less friends, are concerned. And this Haskoy investigation . . ."

"What have you discovered so far?"

İkmen told him about Mr. and Mrs. Lukash, as well as Mr. Koray and his admission with regard to Ofis Hanım and his father.

"She was Mr. Koray Senior's mistress, according to the son," he said.

"And he gave her that house?"

"Yes."

Arto Sarkissian shook his head slowly. "That must have been a blow to Ali and his mother."

"Yes, although they had the other eight houses in that row, which he sold to Mr. Lukash. He said he got a good price and seemed content."

"Yes, but the fact that your father set up his mistress in your own district has to hurt. Many years have passed, but I don't think that one could easily accept such a scenario. Do you?"

But before İkmen could reply, his mobile phone began to ring. It was Constable Yıldız from the crime scene at Haskoy. He had, he said, found someone trying to break into Ofis Hanım's house.

In common with most people, he imagined, Çetin İkmen looked down on the thief when Constable Yıldız presented her to him.

"She won't tell me her name," Yıldız said as he tipped his head towards the tiny, ancient woman at his side.

İkmen looked steadily down into a pair of very dark, but very

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clear, eyes. "Where did you find her, Constable?"

"In the bedroom," Yıldız replied. "Going through drawers."

"Were you?" İkmen asked the woman.

She turned her head defiantly to one side.

Suddenly angered by her stubbornness, Yıldız said to the old woman, "Do you know who is talking to you? This is Inspector Çetin İkmen Bey. He is the most famous police officer in this city. He can solve any crime. Any! You should not attempt to conceal anything from him, he . . ."

"Yes, thank you, Constable," İkmen interrupted with a smile. "Your words are appreciated but . . ." His voice fizzled out as his attention was caught by something that glittered at the old woman's neck. Yes, he was famous, if not rich to go with it, but he didn't always have exactly the right qualifications for every aspect of his job.

Briefly he looked at Arto Sarkissian and smiled. Then, turning back to the old woman, he said, "Madam, I can see from the cross around your neck that you are a Christian lady. My friend here, Dr. Sarkissian, is a Christian, too. If you would like to speak to him . . ."

"An Armenian?" the old woman growled, swatting the notion away with one hand as she did so. "Why would I want to speak to an Armenian?"

"Well . . ."

She moved towards İkmen, withered hands on her thin, black-clad hips. "I am Greek," she said. "I lived here for all of my life until that bastard Koray sold us to the Russian Mafia!"

"Mr. Lukash is Ukrainian . . ."

"Russian, Ukrainian—what is the difference?" she said. "Koray sold us to him, he threw us out. Now I live in one stinking room in Balat. It's so damp it's like living in a hamam!"

"So why didn't you report Mr. Lukash to the police?" İkmen asked, knowing full well what the answer would be.

"And have his men come and beat me to death?" the old woman said. "Famous you may be, Çetin Bey, but realistic you are obviously not!"

İkmen suppressed a smile. "Ah, but madam, we are going off the point, are we not?" he said. "You are, according to my constable here, a thief."

"Yes," the old woman said simply, "I am."

"What were you . . ."

"Arrest me and I'll tell you everything," she said. She then held her arms out in front of her as if offering them for handcuffing. "Go on, then, take me away!"

Her name, İkmen discovered, was Irini Angelos. She was eighty years old and came from one of the Istanbul Greek families, the majority of whom had moved to Greece many years before. Irini had stayed, she said, because, having seen pictures of Athens, she

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found that it was not to her taste. "Too provincial," she declared in that haughty Istanbul Greek way of hers. It made İkmen smile. The old city Greeks had always been like that.

Irini Angelos was, of course, entitled to a lawyer, but she declined the offer on the basis that what she had to say would, in time, prove that she was only a minor villain in the story of Ofis Hanım and her little house in Haskoy. However, she did finally agree that perhaps if the "fat Armenian," as she dubbed Arto Sarkissian, would like to sit in on her interview, that might be for the best. Another witness to her story, she said, would be quite a good idea. Even now, late in the evening, police headquarters beyond the door of the interview room was still heaving with officers and those petitioning their ears and services. In spite of this, İkmen, Yıldız, and Arto Sarkissian listened to the old woman's story with rapt attention.

"When I heard that an elderly woman had been murdered in Haskoy I feared that it was Ofis," she said. "But at first I didn't go to Haskoy because for a little while I didn't really want to know the truth. It is not always good to be right."

"You had reason to believe that Ofis Hanım was in danger?" İkmen asked.

"As soon as Murad Koray died, she was in danger. She had been his mistress, he gave her that house."

"But Mr. Koray died a long time ago, didn't he? That's what his son told me."

"Yes. But while I still lived in Haskoy to keep my eyes on things, that evil witch Emine, that is Murad Koray's wife, and her son wouldn't make a move. I knew that once Ali Koray sold our houses to that gangster there was going to be trouble. I left, I had no choice!"

"But then," İkmen said, "if, as I imagine you are saying, Irini Hanım, Ofis Hanım was your friend, why didn't you go and live with her when Mr. Lukash evicted you?"

The old woman sighed impatiently. "Because that would have exposed her secret!" she said. "And then we would both have died."

İkmen lit a cigarette and then said, "What secret?"

"About the house of serpents," Irini replied simply.

"The house of serpents?" İkmen looked across at Arto Sarkissian, who just shrugged his shoulders.

"Oh, God, I suppose I'm going to have to go right back to the beginning, aren't I?" Irini said amid even more apparent irritation.

"Yes, I think so," İkmen replied. "In fact, Irini Hanım, I think that going back to the beginning of whatever tale you are telling is essential."

She asked for and was given a cigarette and a drink of water before she began.

"When I was thirty years old my husband died, leaving me alone with three small children," she began. "It was the mid 'fifties and most of my family, my brothers and sisters, had gone to live in

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Greece. So I was on my own, without money and no experience of life. I went to see my landlord, Murad Koray, who was not sympathetic in any way. I told him I would somehow get a job, but he told me that if my rent money wasn't on time as usual, my children and I would have to go. I began to cry. I was not as tough then as I am now. But luckily for me, my tears were not in vain. Overhearing our conversation from another room was Murad's mistress, a woman called Pembe. Murad loved her with all of his soul, but once I had gone she upbraided him about his treatment of me and she suggested how I might be helped."

"How was that?" İkmen asked.

The old woman smiled. "Back in the 'fifties, as well as having his houses in Haskoy, Murad Koray had an attraction in Lunar Park. Remember that? It is said that Murad's mother was a Gypsy, which was why he was involved with the fair. Anyway, Murad owned something you may or may not remember, the Snake Pit."

Every bone, sinew, and gram of flesh on İkmen's body shuddered. "Oh, yes, I . . ."

"You've gone a little pale," the old woman said as she squinted to look into İkmen's face. "You don't like snakes?"

İkmen first looked at Arto Sarkissian, who put a hand on his shoulder and then said, "You could say that, yes."

Irini stubbed out her cigarette before she continued. "I too was never that keen. But Pembe, now she was a different matter. She liked snakes, she lay in that pit in Lunar Park with the snakes quite happily. The only problem that she had was that sometimes she needed a break. She would, she said, feel uncomfortable and stiff from time to time down there in the pit. But Murad was a devil for money and wouldn't let her go while there were people to come and see the attraction, which was most of the time back in those days before television." She leaned forward, smiling. "Pembe suggested I pay my rent by taking over from her for a couple of hours every day."

His eyes wide now, İkmen said, "And did you consent to this, this . . ."

"What choice did I have?" Irini said. "I had children, I needed a roof over my head. And when poor old besotted Murad acceded to Pembe's suggestion, I took my chance. Of course, I was thin then, as I am now, and so I didn't look anywhere near as good amongst the snakes as Pembe did. The Slave of the Snakes, they called her."

"Yes, I remember," İkmen said gloomily, or so the old woman felt. "But both of you at your different times were the Slave of the Snakes, surely?"

"Yes, except that I was only a poor imitation," the old woman said. "Pembe was the REAL slave of the snakes, she was their true love."

"Allah, but what a terrible way to have to make a living!"

Irini Angelos laughed. "Oh, you get used to it. You can get used to anything if you really want to—or have to. And besides, it did have its good side, that awful job of mine. Pembe and I became great

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friends. She was so kind and beautiful and fun."

Even though he didn't often revisit that awful scarring encounter with snakes in Lunar Park, İkmen did know that the woman he had tried to rescue from the pit had been of a luscious and full-bodied type. It must have been Pembe. The real Slave of the Snakes.

"I called her Ofis, which means snake in Greek," Irini said.

Arto Sarkissian said, "Oh, but we all said what an unusual name that was! She wasn't Greek . . . "

"No, she was a Turk," Irini said. "She was my very best friend. She never had children of her own, but she treated my three as perfect pets. Nothing was too good for my children when Ofis was around. And she had money! Murad was besotted with her and gave her everything her heart desired."

"Including a house," İkmen said.

"Absolutely." She held one finger aloft. "But there were conditions on that that I will come to later. So Ofis and I worked at the park until eventually, as I am sure you know, it closed. Neither one of us was very young by then, but . . . I did other things; cleaning people's houses, some work in shops. Murad continued to support Ofis, wouldn't let her work without him. And in spite of opposition from his wife and his son, he wanted to set her up in a house near to his own. But there were problems."

"Like what?"

"Like the neighbours who knew her and what she was, and who dubbed her a whore. Like the wife and son, who did not want Murad to give what they felt was their property to Ofis."

"But he gave it to her anyway," İkmen said.

"Only on condition that it revert back to his family on Ofis's death," Irini said. "Ofis, bless her eyes, wanted to leave that house to my children. But she acceded to Murad's request. Not that the trouble stopped there."

İkmen frowned.

"Murad's wife, as well as many of our neighbours, resolved to persecute Ofis once she arrived in our street. I am not a fool and I have always and will always hear everything. If they could not prevent Ofis from living amongst them, they would frighten and cajole her so much that eventually she would have to leave or go insane. People, often those you live closest to, can be vile," she said with what İkmen felt was a lifetime of experience just like this behind her voice.

"So," she continued, "it was then that I came up with the idea of the House of Snakes. The show at Lunar Park was over and I knew that Murad was going to have to find somewhere for the snakes. Ofis wanted to keep them, which horrified Murad. But I told him to let her do it. I also told him to tell the world that she, Ofis Hanım, the lover of snakes, had a whole houseful of the things, both venomous and nonvenomous." She smiled.

"To keep people away," İkmen said.

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"A place where snakes are loose on every surface is a place most people do not want to be," Irini said. "Even a sultan may be dissuaded in this way."

"The Mansion of Snakes!" Arto Sarkissian cried. "Of course!"

"You know," the old woman said, and then nodding her head towards İkmen she continued, "Tell him."

The doctor looked at İkmen and said, "In Bebek there is a mansion called the Mansion of the Snakes. It was built in the eighteenth century and belonged to one Mustafa Efendi. But the sultan of the day, Mahmud II, was so taken with it that he told a friend of Mustafa Efendi, Said Efendi, that he just had to have it. Knowing how much Mustafa Efendi loved his home, and yet at the same time realising that he could hardly deny anything to his sultan, Said Efendi made up a story to save his friend's home. He told the sultan that Mustafa Efendi was a great lover of snakes and that his wonderful home was full of them. The sultan changed his mind about the mansion immediately."

İkmen, smiling, said, "Allah! That's clever. I like that. So, Irini Hanım, you took this story and you used it to protect your friend."

"Ofis moved in and nobody came near," Irini said. "Murad would visit, but people assumed that the snakes were put away when he was in residence. No other person would go inside. Not Murad's wife, his son, or even me. I kept the pretence alive in order to protect her."

"So the house wasn't full of snakes?" İkmen said.

"Only the nonvenomous ones from the pit and then, later, some small Cypriot snakes. The world apart from Murad, Ofis, and myself thought differently, however. Ofis, the snake woman, was left alone, which was just how she liked it. But then Murad died and Ali inherited everything. I knew he hated Ofis, she was like a needle in his pride, an insult to his mother. But he was still afraid to go anywhere near her and she was too poor and old by that time to move. I feared for her."

"Why didn't she move in with you?" İkmen asked. "If you felt that she was vulnerable?"

"Why should she?" Irini said. "The house was hers for the duration of her life, and besides, she liked living with her serpents. Unlike me, she was truly a snake woman in every sense. And although her life was not exactly what it had been when Murad was still alive, it wasn't that bad until Ali Koray's debts began to overwhelm him. He gambles, you see. Badly. He sold my house and the others with it to the foreigner just to pay off his debts."

İkmen, who had instructed Ayşe Farsakoğlu to look into Ali Koray's affairs, said, "Go on."

"I moved. We all moved, we had to. But Ofis stayed, and I became worried for her. Not because of the foreigner, you understand. I mean, he had been rough with us, the rest of the tenants, but then we knew that he would be. He is a gangster. No, I worried about

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Ofis because of Ali Koray."

"Why was that?"

"Ali Koray, it was said, got into debt again very quickly after he sold his property. He is a lazy man who does nothing except sit in his father's office, drink tea, and play cards," she said. "He doesn't work, and so with no work and no property left to sell, what can he do? I'll tell you what I think," she said, "I think that he remembered Ofis's house and that it reverted back to him on her death. I'd lay money myself that he didn't mention that to you when you spoke to him."

"You think that Ali Koray killed Ofis Hanım?"

"Yes," she replied simply, "I do. I know the foreigner wanted to buy it originally, but Ofis wouldn't sell. Ali Koray, however, needed to sell or do something."

"Can you prove it?" İkmen asked.

The old woman flung her withered hands to either side of her body. "Listen to what I say and see what you think," she said. "Whoever killed Ofis shot her house to pieces, as you know. Whoever killed Ofis was making sure he killed all of her snakes along with her. He shot the house just to make sure that nothing was left alive in that place. There were no more than her two little snakes she'd had for years, but he wouldn't have known that. Now, to my knowledge, the foreigner didn't know anything about the snakes. But Ali Koray did, and he was very afraid of them. Now Ofis's house is his and I think that if you ask the foreigner whether Ali Koray has approached him about it, you will find that he has indeed done so."

İkmen sat back in his chair and considered what had just been said to him. To say that Irini Hanım's story was strange was an understatement. But then, Lunar Park and its inhabitants had been nothing if not strange, as he well knew. There was a lot that puzzled about her story—like why Ofis Hanım preferred, actually preferred, to live with snakes. There was also the problem of what Irini had been doing at Ofis's house when Constable Yıldız apprehended her.

"Irini Hanım," he said as he lit another Maltepe cigarette, "we still haven't established exactly why you were at Ofis Hanım's house this evening, have we?"

"No."

"So, you told me that you are a thief . . ."

"Yes," she said, "in part that is true." She reached into the pocket of her long black coat and took out a brightly coloured piece of paper. "I stole this," she said as she laid it on the table in front of İkmen.

He leaned forward in order to look at what turned out to be a small poster. It showed a painting of a very voluptuous woman covered in thin, writhing snakes. Above the image was written *"The Slave of the Snakes—the wonder and glory of Lunar Park."* Pointing down to what to him was indeed a familiar image of a woman he said, "This is Ofis?"

"Yes," the old woman replied. "Lovely, wasn't she? You know that

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years ago Ofis asked me if there was anything I would like from her should she die before me. I said I would like one of these old posters. A young boy who came to the park week in and week out, a poor thing with a harelip, painted it and Murad had it copied. He made a very good likeness of Ofis."

"So if that's the case, you're not stealing anything at all," İkmen said.

"I have no proof Ofis said that I could have anything," Irini replied. "And so . . ."

"And so, and yet that wasn't the whole reason why you went to that house this evening, was it, Irini Hanım?"

For a moment she looked as if she might be about to dissemble, but then she shrugged again and said, "No, it wasn't. I wanted to tell you about Ali Koray, too."

"So why didn't you just come down to the station and ask to see the inspector like everyone else?" Arto Sarkissian asked.

The answer when it came made both the Armenian and the policeman smile.

"Because I don't like the wait," Irini said with a considerable amount of tetchiness in her voice. "People wait for hours to see people like Çetin Bey. I'm far too old and tired to do that. Getting arrested really does cut out a lot of needless time-wasting."

The following day saw Ayşe Farsakoğlu confirm that Ali Koray did indeed have gambling debts. He had also, according to Mrs. Lukash, approached her husband the previous evening about a possible sale of Ofis Hanım's house. And although Ali Koray denied ever having so much as set foot in Ofis Hanım's house, his shoes told another far more sinister story.

"Condemned by snake as opposed to human blood," İkmen said when he went to see Irini Hanım at her small room in Balat a few days later. "It was all over his shoes."

"Ah well, you see the snakes always looked after Ofis," Irini said as she placed a small glass of tea in front of her guest. "She was their goddess."

İkmen smiled. "You know," he said, "that when we found Ofis Hanım she had one snake in each hand."

The old woman nodded her head. "Like the snake goddess of Knossos in Crete," she said. "It is a statue showing a voluptuous bare-breasted woman holding a writhing snake in each hand."

"Oh, yes," İkmen said, "I think I may have seen a picture of that somewhere."

"It is a great treasure," Irini said. "And yet, I imagine you probably don't like it very much, do you, Inspector?"

"You mean because of the snakes?" İkmen said. "You know, Irini Hanim, there is a reason for my phobia about snakes."

"There is always a reason for everything," the old woman replied.

He then told her about his childhood encounter with snakes—

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and with their goddess Ofis Hanım. When he had finished his story Irini said, laughing, "Oh dear, you poor little boy! You know that people were always putting their hands into the pit, but not to save the Slave as you did! They generally had a far more sexual motive. Oh, you poor dear child!"

She put her thin arms around his neck and for just a few moments she held him as he imagined she would have done her own children many years before. In fact, he felt very sad that poor Irini had now seemingly been deserted by her children. For her to end her days in a damp little room in a rough part of Balat seemed both very harsh and very sad. She was so vulnerable. He openly expressed his fears to her. Again she laughed.

"Oh, you don't want to worry about me, Inspector," she said. "I have accepted my fate. But I also have a little help now, too."

Seeing the twinkle in her dark old eyes, İkmen said, "What's that, Irini Hanım?"

"I've just simply followed Ofis's example," she said. "If you look behind you on top of the bookcase you will see."

İkmen was suddenly gripped by a terrible cold feeling. This was coupled with a genuine belief that turning around to see what might be on top of the bookcase was going to be a very bad idea. But he was a man and a police officer and so he couldn't just not do something so simple and seemingly safe as turn his head around. And so he did it quickly, sweating as he moved.

"Oh. Ah."

There were two little snakes on top of the bookcase. They had shiny skins and bright, inquisitive eyes. They were also loose.

"Nonvenomous Cypriot whip snakes, just the same as Ofis had," Irini said with a smile. "Everybody in the neighbourhood knows I have them and no one ever comes near or by. They are my new children. One is called Ofis and one Çetin, in honour of you and what you did for my old friend, Inspector."

"Oh, er, well," İkmen swallowed hard and then wet his bone-dry lips with his tongue. "It is, I suppose, quite an honour to be, er, named alongside one who is a snake goddess . . . "

"Ofis" and "Çetin" looked at him with a lot of sinuous approval.

"They like you," Irini said, still smiling at the odd sight of her little pets and a man they were unconsciously tormenting. "You should make your peace with snakes, you know, Inspector. You, I feel, have a natural affinity with them."

"Yes, well, affinity, er . . . I suppose that even snakes have their likes and dislikes, don't they?" he said.

"Absolutely," the old woman replied. "Would you like another glass of tea, Inspector?"

"Not just at the moment," İkmen said as he tried without success to wrest his gaze from the strange lidless stare of the serpent named especially for and after him. "I'm fine now. Absolutely . . . fine." ●

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PASSPORT TO CRIME

TERESA

by Rubem Fonseca

Translated from the Portuguese by Cliff Landers.

I got in the elevator. Two big fat guys were inside. "An apartment that size and the only people living in it are the old man and that gold digger," one of them said. "The bitch just wants the old man's money," replied the other, "but he won't die, ninety years old and he won't die. She must be real disappointed, she's been putting up with the old man for five years now."

Then they stopped talking and got out ahead of me. At the entrance I asked the doorman, "Who are those two who just left?"

"Mr. Gumercindo's sons," he answered.

"First time I've ever seen them here," I said.

"They don't get along with the old man," he replied. "Since he married Dona Teresa this is the first time they've shown up."

I would always see Mr. Gumercindo leaving on Dona Teresa's arm. They lived in the apartment above mine; we used to go down together in the elevator and would exchange pleasantries. I would hold the door open for them, for which they thanked me amiably. Dona Teresa didn't seem at all like a woman who'd married for money.

The day after hearing the sons' conversation in the elevator, I went down with Mr. Gumercindo and Dona Teresa. Without their noticing, I took a close look at Dona Teresa. She was taking care of Mr. Gumercindo with great affection and devotion. No other woman in the building treated her husband that way.

One day Mr. Gumercindo suffered a cerebral vascular accident. Some time later, the three of us were going down in the elevator,

Rubem Fonseca is one of Brazil's best-known literary figures. This very short tale contains hallmarks of his longer work: lack of sentimentality, emotional honesty, and an ambiguity about the criminality of certain acts. 2008 will see the publication of a collection of his stories in English *(The Taker and Other Stories)* by the University of Rochester's new Open Letter Press.

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with Mr. Gumercindo in a wheelchair.

"Let's go for a stroll in the park," said Dona Teresa. "You like going to the park, don't you?" she asked. Gumercindo nodded.

"May I go along?" I said.

After a turn through the square we sat in the shade of a tree. Mr. Gumercindo started to doze off, and Dona Teresa wiped a bit of saliva from the corner of his mouth. I saw that her eyes were filled with tears.

"He used to be so full of life," she said with a sad smile.

I met them other times and noted that Dona Teresa had become exhausted because of her husband's illness. She was seventy but looked much older. She had lost weight and her face had become paler. There are cases in which the sick person ends up killing their caretaker.

I spent a few days in São Paulo doing a job for the Dispatcher, a customer easy to dispatch.

When I got back I went up to the old couple's apartment. Dona Teresa opened the door. She looked so sick that I felt obliged to say, "Dona Teresa, you should get a nurse, someone to help you take care of Mr. Gumercindo."

"He doesn't want it," she answered, "he wants me to take care of him myself, just me. And I think he's right. A nurse wouldn't treat him the way he deserves."

I was away for a week handling another job for the Dispatcher, a more complicated one this time. The customer had a bodyguard who gave me problems. When I got back, I again encountered Mr. Gumercindo's two big fat sons in the elevator, accompanied by two thin women. They nodded in a friendly way and left ahead of me.

"Are those Mr. Gumercindo's sons and daughters-in-law?"

"Yes," answered the doorman. "They live here now. Mr. Gumercindo died, but the apartment's big enough for all of them."

"What about Dona Teresa?" I said.

"I haven't seen her," he replied.

I ran into the new residents of Mr. Gumercindo's apartment again. The two women looked like whores. I know whores when I see them. The two sons were even fatter. They talked about the new cars they'd bought. The women wore expensive clothes. Those guys have been doing something they shouldn't, I thought. In my work I have to be able to sniff out who's dangerous and who isn't, who's a sonofabitch and who isn't. Those two were both.

After a month I found it strange not to have seen Dona Teresa in the elevator. She liked to walk in the park and sit on one of the benches to take the sun. "Have you seen Dona Teresa?" I asked the doorman. He said he hadn't.

I went up to Mr. Gumercindo's apartment, rang the bell. A maid opened the door.

"I'm here to see Dona Teresa," I said. The woman slammed the

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door in my face.

I rang the bell again. I heard the woman's voice yelling from inside, "Dona Teresa can't have visitors."

I shouted, "Can't you open the door to talk to me?"

"I have orders not to open the door to strangers," the woman yelled from inside.

Two days later I returned to Dona Teresa's apartment. I knew it was the maid's day off. It was the time of the doorman's lunch break. I first removed something from the little leather case where I kept brochures about computer equipment. I rang the bell and saw that the peephole had darkened. Someone was looking at me from inside.

One of the fat guys opened the door a crack. "I came to visit Dona Teresa," I said.

"She can't have visitors," he replied, irritated. "Get lost." He started to close the door but I didn't let him.

"Open it," I said, sticking the gun against his forehead.

Standing in the living room was his brother. "Where is she, you sons of bitches?"

"She's traveling," one of them stammered.

"Traveling my ass," I said, slamming him in the face with the pistol butt, across the nose.

Dona Teresa was in one of those hospital beds, both wrists tied to the metal railing. "Untie her," I said. They untied her. "Now sit her up in that armchair."

"Are you all right?" I asked. She nodded that she was. "Can you keep a secret?"

"Yes, I can," she answered in a weak voice.

"A terrible secret?"

"Yes, Mr. José," she said.

I took the two fat guys into the bathroom, ordered them into the tub, and put a bullet in each one's head. I always shoot in the head. I took their wallets and credit cards from their pockets. I went back to the living room.

"I killed those bastards. Nobody must know it was me. Say it was a robber."

"Yes," she said.

I went into the whores' bedrooms and got the jewels from the drawers. Then I left, leaving the door open.

In my apartment I stuck all that junk into several supermarket bags. I put it all in my leather case, left, took a cab, got far away in another part of town, and threw each bag into a different garbage can.

When I got back, there was a huge commotion in the building.

"They robbed Mr. Gumercindo's apartment," the doorman said, "and killed his two sons."

"Really? How is that possible?"

"It was when I was at lunch," the doorman answered.

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"What about Dona Teresa?"

"She's okay," he replied.

I went up to Mr. Gumercindo's apartment. The two whores were there, whimpering.

"You can pack your bags and go somewhere else," I said. "The apartment belongs to Dona Teresa."

When the pair of whores had left, Dona Teresa kissed my hand, "You're a saint, Mr. José. I'll keep our secret till the day I die."

I went back to my apartment. A saint. A saint my ass. I'm a hit man. I kill for money.

Not always. ●

What a Friend We Have in Sherlock

(A Hymn to Holmes)

by Len Moffatt

"What a friend we have in Sherlock!"
So they said at Scotland Yard,
Thanks to all the help he gave them
Solving cases they found hard.

Watson was his faithful Boswell
On their cases near and far;
A ghostly hound, a secret serpent
Were among the most bizarre!

But the case that bothered Sherlock
More than those he never solved
Was the one with Irene Adler
When his heart became involved.

There are rumors that their offspring
Favored Mycroft at his birth.
He became the Wolfe named Nero,
Sharp of wit and wide of girth.

We are grateful to our Sherlock
And his clandestine affair.
Thanks to him and Irene Adler,
The Master had a big fat heir!

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When There's a Will

by Judith Cutler

Why Wally Moore should have taken it into his thick head to bid against Griff for a Victorian dressing case, goodness knows. Wally's a jewellery man.

And why Griff should have chosen to join battle was beyond me, too. I knew he'd never seen eye to eye with Wally, so it's possible he was driven by malice—though in his case it was rarely pure and never simple. Meanwhile, as the two raised the stakes of their tiff, the estate of Marguerite Fairborn, deceased, was rubbing its hands in glee at the prospect of its growing profits.

Here with another entry in her series featuring antiques dealers Tripp and Townend is Britain's Judith Cutler. The author of several acclaimed series at novel length, Ms. Cutler has provided *EQMM* with many short stories over the years, ranging in setting from several historical periods to the present day. Her novel *Still Waters*—the third in her Fran Harman series—was published in the U.K. in March (Allison & Busby). †

Were any of her beneficiaries present? I looked around the cluttered drawing room of a worthy Edwardian house set in a jungle of a garden. The room's windows were too small and the mullions far too heavy to give me any pleasure in it. From the day it was built the place had been passed down through the same family, so there should have been rich pickings. I wondered why there weren't—why was nothing passed down from generation to generation as an heirloom?

They'd certainly not been keen on china. Apart from everyday stuff even a charity shop would have sniffed at, there were just a couple of quite hideous vases, and an epergne even I might have used as target practice.

What I had my eye on was a rather pretty pot cupboard by Waring & Gillow, part of an Edwardian mahogany bedroom suite—dressing table, marble-topped washstand, and huge double wardrobe so bleached by the sun that it would take a fellow restorer hours of work to bring back its original colour. For some reason, the auctioneers had split the suite into separate lots. I

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couldn't understand it, because usually the sum of the individual parts is nothing like the value of a complete set.

As for mourners, I could see no red snuffly noses or surreptitiously dabbed eyes. Didn't anyone care enough to come? Or, to use Griff's words, had the line died out? Griff was trying to educate me to his Oxbridge standard, but since I'd not so much dropped out of school as never dropped in in the first place, he had his work cut out. But he and I toiled together, with very rarely a cross word between us, just as if he were a dear loving grandfather bent on educating a dim, stroppy, but cherished, grandchild. And I loved him as much as if he were.

Apart from a crop of familiar faces from the trade, there were a couple of good-looking young men not far from us, one of them fiddling with a mobile phone with enough functions to make your eyes water. Unfortunately it would be a moot point whether Griff or I started flirting with them. Griff would keep forgetting that he had a long-term partner to whom he claimed to be devoted. He and Aidan had been *together*, but not *living together*, for years. Though I adored Aidan's late Georgian house in Tenterden, a few miles down the road from our village, and all the exquisite furniture it contained, he and I never quite managed to like each other. As for my love life, I was definitely ready to be cheered up; I'd just had yet another relationship end with a bruised ego, if not a broken heart.

Actually, those young men might even be flirting with each other, their well-groomed heads bending intimately together over the catalogue. Or conspiratorially, of course, Griff whispered, as he followed my eye. At that point I was sure one of them looked straight at us.

Eventually, just as Griff must have been about to concede defeat, Wally's mobile beeped and he lost interest. The dressing case—coromandel with brass stringing—was ours for a pretty hefty four hundred pounds. Okay, we'd be able to sell it on for twice, possibly three times, that amount when we'd titivated it. And it was good. Very good. All the cut-glass bottles, complete with stoppers, were in their places, and even the little silver-mounted manicure set was intact. I'd have loved that box for myself—though I'd never use it for cosmetics or perfumes, of course. What Griff called my powders and potions came in plastic bottles, courtesy of our pharmacy loyalty card—Griff indulged himself with so many vitamins and supplements I swear he'd shake if you rattled him.

No, I wanted the box because . . . because it was beautiful, I suppose. Perhaps that was the reason why Griff had hung on for grim death. And now it was—yes, it was his.

"I know just who'll want this," he said, with a little rub of his hands.

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So it was spoken for. I wouldn't let myself sigh: It would bring in a good profit, and antiques dealers couldn't afford to be sentimental.

At last the pot cupboard came up. It was late in the day and by now the room was pretty empty. The bigger pieces went down very cheaply, and even the pot cupboard came my way for less than half what I'd expected.

I was loading our booty into the new van, proudly lettered *Tripp and Townend, Antiques Dealers*. Griff had insisted on having a proper business partnership contract drawn up, mumbling about protecting me when he shuffled off his mortal coil. I had been perfectly happy to drive the *G Tripp Antiques* van, the odd gear apart, but this was a splendid automatic affair, ostensibly bought so that Griff could drive despite his arthritis. In fact, all the driving came down to me.

"And which are you? Tripp or Townend?" asked a voice in my ear. It was a nice voice, one Griff would have called well-modulated. And it belonged to one of the good-looking young men I'd noticed earlier. I was cross with myself for not noticing his approach. Griff had always dinned it into me that since I could be carrying something it would be fatal to drop, I must never be in a position where I might jump. Or be robbed, of course. Because sometimes I carry—somewhere about what Griff calls my person—valuable jewellery.

But the young man's smile was as pleasant as I'd hoped. He'd shed his equally dishy friend and didn't seem to be about to rob me.

"I'm the Townend half," I said. "Lina Townend." An older generation might politely have shaken hands. Though perhaps not if they were wrestling with a pot cupboard.

"I saw you across the room," he said, "and you weren't at all like any of the others so I just thought I'd . . . I'm Conrad, by the way."

"Hi, Conrad. Are you in the trade too?"

He hesitated, which alarmed me. Surely he was or he wasn't.

At last he said, "I'm just interested at the moment. I like old things and I've come into a spot of money so I wondered . . ." He smiled. "You know, a bit of this, a bit of that . . ."

I didn't know. I'd served a long unwritten apprenticeship with Griff, who though the tenderest of taskmasters was rigorous in his training. I'd learnt as much as I could before he let me loose with any sort of deal, and even then I'd made hideous—and expensive—mistakes. It would have been worse except he claimed I was something of a "divvy"—in other words, I had an instinct for what was genuine and what was fake. I only wish it worked with people.

"Are you going back tonight?" Conrad asked, with a twinkle and

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a shuffle of the shoulders that meant he might have been suggesting a drink if we were anywhere local.

" 'Fraid so." Griff got very tired these days, and I liked to make sure he got a night's rest in his own bed, plus a lazy day, before we went on any more expeditions.

"Far to go?"

"A couple of hundred miles, give or take." I should have asked him the same question, but my mouth felt too dry.

"Do you come to many of these sales?" he persisted.

Was that the equivalent of, *Do you come here often?* I wasn't sure so I simply took the question at face value. "If we see anything promising in the catalogue. The trouble is that after *Antiques Roadshow* on TV everyone thinks they're experts and about to find a bargain. So they make us all pay shedloads for complete rubbish."

"You didn't pay all that much for that little cupboard." He nodded at it.

"No, I was lucky, wasn't I?" I agreed. I would have loved to tell him about its twin, already in place beside my bed. I did like symmetry. And I was fairly sure that a future customer would like his and hers cupboards either side of their bed, and though I'd miss them, I'd enjoy the profit. But I didn't think he'd want to hear about that, or about the origin of the term. Pot cupboards used to house chamber pots—or "gazunders" as Griff called them—in pre-*en suite* days.

I'd better say something. "Did nothing catch your eye?"

"Only you."

I could feel a blush rising from my navel. What could I say? "Me and my pot cupboard," I managed.

"Why did you want it?" He seemed really interested.

"Why does any antiques dealer want anything?" Except when she wanted it for herself.

"To sell it and make a profit? Well, sell it to me now."

Which was just what I'd thought Griff and Wally Moore should have done, of course—negotiated a post-sale deal. So why didn't I want to sell it to this charming young man, with the most beautiful blue eyes and white, even teeth? I didn't want him anywhere near it. "This is for my own use," I said lamely.

"An antique bedside cupboard? Why on earth would you want one of those?"

"Why should you? Hello, Griff—here's someone trying to buy my cupboard before I've even got it home," I said with a nervous laugh.

Griff looked so honest and transparent I knew he was going to lie for me. He shook his head sadly. "You know I can't let it into the house until it's been treated, my dear. Or into anyone else's. I wouldn't answer for the consequences if I did. Not with that level

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of infestation. Into the van with it immediately, and make sure you seal the polythene round it. Here." He dug in his trousers and produced a roll of tape.

I did as I was told, without a word of protest, even though he was soon deeper in conversation with Blue Eyes than I had managed. And no doubt without a blush, either. Even at his big fat lie. Somehow he managed to pop the dressing case into the van for me to bubble-wrap, too, while he continued his conversation. I gave it a farewell stroke and a little pat of farewell.

At last I heard Griff getting into the front of the van, so I emerged and slammed the rear door shut. Conrad Blue Eyes was still there. His smile was very warm.

"I wanted to talk to you and I end up listening to the old guy for ten minutes," he said. "How can I get in touch?"

I dug in my jeans pocket and produced a rather bent business card. We have two types—one with all our contact details, including our address, and the other with just our mobile-phone number and e-mail address. For some reason I gave him one of these. Well, it was too late to grab it back and change it. I just hoped he'd be interested enough to call me.

Or, given that he might be more interested in the pot cupboard than in me, perhaps I didn't.

Without waiting to wave us off, he disappeared. At this point Griff decided he needed one last visit to the loo before we set off, so he disappeared too. For ten minutes. Sighing, I beat my fists on the steering wheel. I had a hundred-and-eighty-mile drive, including a stretch on the vile M25, and he did his Cheshire Cat act—without so much as a smile.

But he was chortling when he came back.

"I do believe you're not the only one to have been chatted up," he announced, fastening his seat belt. "I could have told the lady she was wasting her time with my good self, but it was nice to hear such cut-glass vowels."

"Tell," I suggested, heading for the road.

"Nothing to tell. She was about my age, good-looking in a Deborah Kerr way, and very well dressed."

"So what did she want?"

"Dear heart, what made you such a cynic? Not me? Tut, tut."

"Who else?" I laughed. But it wasn't really Griff's fault: If you have a childhood like mine, you get cynical, believe me. "Anyway, if she didn't want anything, she must have fancied you." I shot a quick sideways glance. "And why not? You look very dapper these days."

"Thanks to you, dear heart. I've never known such a dab hand with an iron as you. I don't know what she wanted," he continued. "We simply chatted about the dreadful state of the house. There's a rumour I picked up in the gents', by the way. They mean to turn

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it into an urban wildlife centre. And with that garden who knows what they might end up studying."

"Tigers, at very least. So what's holding them up?" I joined the tail end of what looked like a very long jam.

"Lack of documentation. Even though the solicitor knows that's what Marguerite Fairborn wanted, no one can find any paperwork."

"Surely that's what solicitors are supposed to do? Keep wills safe," I objected.

"Indeed. But even solicitors aren't immune to acts of arson. Some yobs thought it would be fun to stuff fireworks and petrol into the letterbox and set fire to it."

"Fireproof boxes?"

"The codicil was still in draft form, awaiting the old lady's signature. She had her original draft, but after her stroke couldn't communicate where it was. So although her lawyers are doing their best to fend off the vultures, I should imagine a pukka block of luxury apartments will soon be on that site—and bother the tigers, or whatever. And her distant relatives—who probably never sent her so much as a Christmas card—will be rubbing their hands with glee. Now, dear one, shall we have some music on this space-age radio of ours?"

I'd not really expected Conrad Blue Eyes to phone, nor did he. I didn't have time to fret, however. One thing you can't do when you're restoring precious china is worry about your love life, or lack of it. If your hands start shaking it's fatal.

Then Griff and I headed off to set up our stall at a big antiques fair practically in our own backyard here in Kent. Detling isn't one of my favourite places to work, because I've never known it when it wasn't blowing a gale. However, Griff had got it into his head that because it wasn't far to travel we ought to support it, so we always did. Perhaps half of me hoped that what Griff would call my suitor might be tempted by the prospect of lots of luscious antiques, and thus me. But if I couldn't think of anything to say to him, what was the point? Anyway, I smiled a lot all day, and sold several pieces at a considerable profit, though not a lot in total.

I got to the car park to find a car—a posh Audi—nose to nose with the van. Rubbing noses, in fact. How anyone could have managed to run into an object as large and obvious as this, goodness knows. But this woman had, and was standing wringing her immaculately manicured hands in distress. She looked ready to weep.

I tucked my own battered paws into my pockets and quickened my pace. Soon she was all over me with apologies, pressing her insurance details on me and begging my forgiveness. Frankly I didn't think it was an insurance job, more a cash-in-hand one, to

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preserve her no-claims bonus, but she insisted it was done by the book. Which meant, she said, an exchange of addresses.

I'd never been in that situation before, strangely enough, so I handed over the business card with all the details, wrote our insurance details on the back, assured her that I would survive the terrible shock of the impact, and waited for her to move so I could pull the van out from its slot. She seemed inclined to hover, but suddenly returned to the Audi and shot off.

Only now could I inspect the damage properly. What damage? There was hardly a chip. So why, I asked Griff, who'd appeared at my shoulder, all the fuss?

He shook his head. Clearly all he wanted to do was go home and put his feet up.

Griff may be fey in many ways, but being winsome and vague doesn't extend to protecting his property. The cottage and shop both have state-of-the-art locks and CCTV, augmented by constantly primed video cameras. No missing a mug shot of Burglar Bill because no one's remembered to renew the cassette.

Outside the cameras are quite obvious: it's clear we're not to be messed with. But inside they're much more discreet. Anyone browsing our shelves, better still making a purchase, is recorded. We've had no violent attacks since the system was installed, a good thing, since though I'm as tough as old boots I'm pretty small, and Griff, of course, is showing his years.

When we looked at the tapes the next day, we found that a couple of customers had actually turned on their heels when they saw the external cameras. The woman sported a headscarf such as the Queen might wear, plus Jackie Onassis sunglasses, while the man with her had his collar turned up, his porkpie hat pulled right down. Next day we actually had a woman in the shop completely swathed in a burkha and niqab, but I'd have sworn what little skin we could see was standard Anglo-Saxon: was she an extreme convert, or simply casing the joint? Griff tried to engage her in his usual friendly and helpful conversation but she was decidedly averse to that—again, I suppose, if she was a genuine fundamentalist Muslim, she might have objected to any man's courtly flirtation.

Then we had a call from our car-insurance company. The name and address of the other party, they said, didn't tally with the ownership records of the vehicle. Which wasn't surprising, because the vehicle with the number I'd written down was a Clio from Cardiff, not an Audi from Aldershot.

Since by now you couldn't even see where the cars had touched, Griff was inclined to dismiss the whole affair. I was less happy. Had I fallen for a simple ruse to find where we lived?

I was even more worried when I was tailed for five miles,

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despite my attempts to shake it off, by a 4x4 with tinted windows. I wanted to stop and confront the driver, but I had Griff with me, and I wasn't about to expose him to any manhandling. The driver eventually parked where he clearly thought he was out of range of our cameras, but he'd reckoned without our backup kit, so we had excellent footage of him regarding the place through what I suppose were night-vision binoculars. I was furious and ready to smash in his windscreen, but Griff was afraid I might get hurt, and wouldn't let me do more than take a photo from an upstairs room.

And—guess what—the 4x4's number was the same as the Audi's.

I was getting really worried, especially when the word on the street was that Wally Moore had had his place—and his face—smashed up by intruders. He wasn't saying anything. As soon as he was out of hospital, people said, he'd nipped off to his son's place on the Costa del Crime.

"You ought to contact that tame policeman of yours," Aidan said, accepting from Griff a glass of the driest fino sherry, two old gentlemen of a certain age and class happy in each other's company. They usually dined, as Griff said, *à deux*, at Aidan's, but occasionally he would come round here to our cottage and I would be one of the party.

"I don't see what they can do until a crime's been committed," Griff protested.

Aidan and I exchanged a glance.

"When did all this trouble start?" Aidan asked, nibbling a homemade cheese straw, one of Griff's specialities.

"After the mishap to the van," Griff said. "And no, Aidan, I wasn't driving it while under the influence. It was stationary at the time."

"A posh lady in a posh car hit us," I added. "And though there was hardly a scratch she had the manners to hang round and exchange insurance details."

Adrian cocked his head. "How very unusual. Had anyone witnessed the incident?"

"No."

"Which makes her honesty all the more surprising. Well, well." He sipped his fino. "Had you bought anything particularly valuable that day? Or sold something for a great deal of cash?"

Griff snorted. "At Detling! Pin money only, dear boy."

"But this lady did go to a great deal of trouble to—ah—scrape your acquaintance? How very strange." Aidan's smile had a whole lot of meanings.

"Griff's quite popular with ladies of a certain age these days,

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aren't you, Griff? There was your Deborah Kerr look-alike at the house sale. Flirted with you for a good ten minutes," I said.

Aidan raised an eyebrow as he turned to me. "And did your lady resemble Deborah Kerr?"

"No idea. Never met the lady. I was just quoting Griff."

"A classic English beauty . . . If you will permit me . . ." He leant back in his chair and ran his fingers along the bookshelves, finally reaching out an encyclopaedia of film. He leafed through and then passed me the volume. "There. Did your lady resemble her?"

"I think you'll find the caption says Kay Kendall," I snapped. "And no, she wasn't like her. Much older."

"Just testing, Lina." He turned more pages. "Here. And I'm not cheating this time."

"Not as beautiful as her, but there is a resemblance," I conceded.

He pulled a face. "I wonder if it is possible that the two women were one and the same. Did you buy anything exciting at the house sale? Something someone else wanted?"

I blushed. "There was a young man who wanted my pot cupboard." I was dimly aware of a glance being exchanged over my head. "Very much. But he's not been in touch since."

"Your pot cupboard? It seems an unlikely object of desire. Was it empty?"

"Completely. Hey," I added, picking up their doubt and excitement, "you don't think the old lady left her diamonds stuck to the back of the drawer, do you?" I whipped off upstairs and came back carrying it.

If there had been so much as a dead woodworm in it, we would have found it. But there was nothing—that had simply been an excuse to stop Conrad Blue Eyes forcing my hand.

"Well in that case," Aidan said, "I should take it and its twin to your next fair—clearly marked SOLD—and leave them as bait. See if either Deborah Kerr or the faint-hearted young man appears."

I've never found reading easy, but at least I'm not afraid of books anymore, and I can also work my way round the Internet without too many tears. All the same, I didn't embark on my next project—one I didn't tell Griff about—lightly. I was going to find out all I could about Victorian dressing cases: the best makers, that sort of thing. Even if I could never lay my hands on that lovely coromandel one, I needed, in a way I can't explain, to know about it. But the research—a bit of a posh word for what I was trying to do—went slowly, because I still had my restoration and repair work, and I spent longer in the shop these days, simply so that Griff could preserve his strength. And if any customers were going to get violent, at least I knew enough about street-fighting to give as good as I got.

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Nothing like that happened. We had a couple of quiet weeks, with no harassment at all, and accordingly set off to Ardingly Fair with both newly polished pot cupboards and a couple of SOLD labels. And who should appear, halfway through the first morning, but Blue Eyes.

"I thought you didn't want to sell that," he said, without preamble. "And now you've sold a pair! Who to?"

"All our transactions are confidential," I said primly. Then I added, "Believe me, I didn't want to sell, but—well, you know how it is if you get a cash-flow problem. The buyer's nipped off to get some cash."

"You know I wanted it!" Those blue eyes seemed very cold.

"If you'd contacted me I could have told you. But you never did." I swallowed hard, as if both upset and angry.

"Well, whatever the other guy's offered, I'll give you double," he said, producing a well-filled wallet.

If I'd really sold them there's no way I'd have accepted. As it was, I thought of a number and doubled it. And had the notes counted out into my hand. Okay, I would miss the cupboards either side of my bed, but with that sort of deal I couldn't afford to be sentimental.

"Just get them away from here straightaway," I whispered, looking furtively from right to left.

"Are you sure that was what you wanted to do?" Griff said over a medicinal glass of champagne with his lunch.

I patted the wad of notes in my bumbag and smiled. "What was it you told me—there are as good fish still in the sea as ever came out of it? Well then, now we can afford to go fishing."

"We can indeed. And who knows how soon we shall find just what you want to catch."

We found it—or rather them—much sooner than I'd ever have guessed. We were joining the trudge to the caravan park at the end of the day when I saw some legs sticking out of a hedge and stopped. No, I don't mean human legs. Mahogany cupboard legs, eight in all. The poor things were no longer joined to their bodies. Two pretty inlaid doors were lying a little further along, and beside them two polished tops.

"Poor, poor pot cupboards. What have they ever done to deserve that?" I wept, gathering up what looked no better than firewood and stacking it neatly.

Griff put an arm round my shoulders. "I suspect they didn't contain whatever that young man of yours hoped they'd contain."

"He's not my young man! Nor ever could be, not if he does this sort of thing. Oh, Griff, thank goodness that dressing case is safe with whoever commissioned you to buy it!"

"Dressing case? What dressing case?"

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"The one you and Wally Moore locked antlers over at Miss Fairborn's house sale. The one you spent so much money on. Remember? You said you knew exactly who'd want it."

He kissed me. "So I did. And now, my dear one, I'm afraid our supper must wait. We have to go and see Aidan immediately. Oh, bring those poor wrecks if you want. If anyone can repair them, you can."

It's not so very far from Ardingly to Tenterden, but finding the wrecked cupboards had upset me and I was dead crabby. "I don't understand," I bleated, "why we have to turn out in this weather and go to Tenterden. Surely a phone call would do?"

"Do you trust me, Lina?"

"You know I do. With my life."

"Well, pray just drive. Or better still, pull over here so that I can drive and you can make that mobile phone of yours work. Good. Now," he said, settling himself into the driver's seat, "I think you should summon to Aidan's that police-officer friend who thinks the sun shines out of your ears. And you should ask him to tell his constabulary colleagues to pay a great deal of attention to our own abode this evening. Tell them to look out for a handsome woman of a certain age or an equally handsome young man, possibly her son. No, no questions," he said. "You know how I have to concentrate on my driving."

So I couldn't tell him that DS Dan Freeman wasn't an admirer of mine. Not really. He'd always been kind, but nothing more, and I wasn't sure if I wanted a man a good ten years older than me, with wispy hair he refused to have close-cropped, to be anything more than kind. All the same, it was nice to know he'd drop everything to talk to me, and even nicer when he asked if the shop and cottage were at serious risk of being burgled.

"Tell him it's at imminent risk," Griff shouted. "And cut the call as quickly as you can so you can take over at the wheel. Unless he wants to attend a road accident!"

"All this sudden interest in our premises has to be tied in with the dressing case, you see, Dan," Griff explained, no longer a shaky old man but a very alert professional. "Do sit down."

We were all in Aidan's elegant sitting room.

Dan looked about him as if unable to believe the pictures on the wall. "So where is it?"

"Aidan is fetching it downstairs now. I had asked him to look after it for me until Lina's birthday. But I see it must make an appearance now. And I would like it to give up whatever secret it holds before someone smashes it up to find it."

"Oh, Griff! But—but—" I'd hardly had time to hug him when Aidan reappeared, irritably waving me to a seat.

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There: On my lap lay the coromandel dressing case, its wood glowing and the brassware with not a trace of tarnish.

Even Dan gasped. "Hey, that's lovely." He added, letting himself down, "What exactly is it?"

"It's what every posh lady would have had," I said, grateful I had checked out as much as I could. "A sort of portable dressing table, with bottles and pots for all her cosmetics. And here, in the lid, behind the mirror, she might keep incriminating correspondence. And maybe more." As I pressed on the mirror to release it, I fully expected something priceless to drop out—the something that Blue Eyes had thought might be hidden in the pot cupboard. But there was nothing. Nothing at all.

I could have wept. The others sighed as if someone had missed a Cup Final penalty.

I lifted every little lid, moved every bottle, and pressed anything that seemed likely to move. Nothing. I felt like a conjuror whose rabbit was on strike.

"Perhaps they just wanted it because it's beautiful," Dan said.

I shook my head. If they'd appreciated beauty, then they wouldn't have smashed those cupboards. "Just let me think."

"Thinking is what a jealous husband would have done, my child. He'd apply logic to finding where his wife had hidden incriminating letters. Whoever designed this hoped only someone with intuition would be able to find it. Like priest's holes," Griff explained to Dan, who clearly didn't quite follow.

"If a jealous husband couldn't find it, he might slam down the lid or throw it onto the floor," I said. "So if we start shaking it we might activate some safety lock."

Dan's mobile phone rang. Excusing himself as politely as if he were Griff, he turned away and took the call. "Take them in and let them kick their heels for a bit. I'll talk to them as soon as I've finished here," he said at last. Cutting the call, he sighed, "If only we knew what the buggers were looking for—oh, yes, we caught them in the act, a young male and an older female, believed to be his mother."

"I do wish you wouldn't use police-ese," said Griff pettishly. "No one ever talks about males and females, not if they're human."

"And we do know what they're looking for," I said, surprising even myself. "The codicil to Miss Fairborn's will. The one she never had time to sign. The one leaving her house and garden in trust. The one they want to destroy so they can sell everything to developers."

Their eyes couldn't have been rounder if the case itself had spoken.

"Now all I have to do is find it." I ran my hands gently over the worn velvet lining, trying to feel if it had ever been disturbed. But that was crazy. Miss Fairborn stowed it for safekeeping but she'd

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want to be able to get it out to hand it to her solicitor. Any attempt to pull the velvet away would simply have torn it.

"We'd better get our forensic team to check it out." Dan held out his hands for it.

"And let them take apart a work of art like this? Indeed no!" Aidan exploded.

Griff added quietly, "Trust Lina, Dan. She'll get there sooner or later. Why don't we adjourn to the kitchen and leave her in peace? Aidan makes the best cup of coffee you can imagine. . . ."

Dan looked at his watch. "You can have five minutes and then it goes to Forensics."

"I know it looks like a screw," I said, "but if you lift it gently, see what happens. There! This panel shifts slightly and a drawer comes out, all of its own accord. Do you want to see what's in it, Dan?"

Almost as if he were in church, he leant forward and fished out a piece of paper. Yes, there was the solicitor's letter heading, and there Marguerite Fairborn's signature. There was an additional scrawl, with the words DARREN BLOWER, WINDOW CLEANER, printed after it. Bless her, she'd even got it witnessed.

Dan grabbed the paper, and set off to wave it under Blue Eyes's nose.

"So the urban wildlife sanctuary will come into being, just as the old lady wanted," Aidan said, passing me a glass of Champagne. "And with luck, Deborah Kerr and Conrad Blue Eyes will go down for a good long stretch."

"And the scales will drop from Lina's eyes and she'll realise what a handsome prince she has in Dan," Griff said, raising his glass.

I shook my head as I sat with the case still on my knee.

Aidan filled the silence. "My betting is that the two criminals will just get fleas in their ears—after all, breaking and entering isn't really a capital crime."

"They smashed up those pot cupboards!" Griff objected.

"But they were their own to do what they want with. My advice," he added, looking round to make sure Dan really had gone, "is to say nothing about them—unless someone asks, of course. As it is, you simply found some pieces of wood in a hedge, Lina—and if I know you, you'll nurse them all back to health in no time. And they'll end up back on either side of your bed, with the dressing case on one of them."

And so they did.

But Dan still hasn't got to see them. ●

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Art by Mark Evan Walker

HANDEL AND GRETEL

by Edward D. Hoch and Jon L. Breen

Gretel Domonick was one of those young women who always attract a second glance. Her curly red hair was unusual enough, but coupled with her youthful face and petite figure, your first impression was of Orphan Annie come to life. It wasn't until your wandering eye traveled down to her booted feet, with their four-inch heels, that you realized this Gretel was no fairy tale.

"I'm Walt Stanton," I said, shaking hands. "This is my partner, Juliet Ives." Juliet merely gave her a nod, a sure sign there'd be no love lost between the two of them. "What can we do for you?"

She hesitated, glancing around at our unpretentious office across the street from Manhattan's Strand Bookstore. Finally she said, "I understand you're a courier service."

"That's right," Juliet agreed, jumping into the conversation. "What would you like delivered, and where?"

"I don't have it yet. I need someone to accompany me to England while I retrieve some valuable papers and manuscripts, then deliver them back here to New York."

"Are these manuscripts your property?" I asked.

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"They will be. I'm purchasing them."

"I want to make clear that Stanton and Ives is a courier service only. We do not function as bodyguards."

"I don't need bodyguards. The woman who has the papers agreed to turn them over to me. I just need your service to carry them back here."

"I assume they have some value."

"They are manuscripts and musical compositions of George Frideric Handel," she told us in an awed whisper, as if fearing the walls had ears. "They are nearly three hundred years old."

Our book reviewer Jon L. Breen, an award-winning fiction writer with a flair for the classical whodunit, seemed the ideal choice to complete the story Edward D. Hoch was working on when he died. We had no idea, however, that he would come up with a solution to the crime the legendary Ed Hoch conceived that would so neatly bring together all the complex plot elements and characters. We think the story reflects brilliantly upon them both! ¶

Ives perked up. "Handel of Handel's *Messiah?*"

"Yes, but that came later in his life, in 1741. The papers that interest me are from his early days in London, around 1717."

I decided it was time to quote our fee by the day, plus all transportation and lodging costs. It didn't seem to scare her off. "I'll handle the plane tickets and there'll be no lodging expense," she explained. "For the one night we'll be there, we can stay with Mrs. Oldfield. It'll take that long to have my initial payment transferred to her account."

"She's the one with the Handel material?" Ives asked.

"Exactly. Would one of you be free to accompany me next week?"

Ives and I exchanged glances. "We usually work as a team. On long plane flights it's necessary that one be awake at all times to safeguard the property. The fee I quoted is for both of us."

"Very well." Gretel Domonick produced a checkbook from her purse. "We should be gone for three days, counting travel time. How much of a retainer do you require?"

"Two days now and the remainder when we return."

She nodded and wrote out the check. "I'm thinking we could get a flight to London next Monday evening. Would that be satisfactory?"

Though we now employed a full-time secretary, Stanton & Ives was not yet a thriving business. We'd started the company five years earlier, just out of Princeton. Our five or six jobs a month were barely enough to keep us going, and most of our assignments were deadly dull. We liked to imagine the day when we'd have a staff of a dozen or so, chasing around the world on courier assign-

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ments, but we both knew that day was a long way off.

"At least we're getting to see a lot of the world," Ives remarked that night during our usual postcoital chat. "This'll be our third trip to England. They say it's lovely in June."

"We'll see."

Gretel met us at JFK with the tickets and we landed at Heathrow early Tuesday morning. It was obvious that she was a seasoned traveler, surprising us with a hired car to transport us to the country home of Mrs. Oldfield, about an hour away. The familiar early-morning fog was already dissipating as we sped through the English countryside, though it was a bit cooler than we'd expected.

Gretel told us a little about the woman we'd be visiting. "She's in her late sixties now, and still lives on the family estate with her daughter, Veronica Biel. The daughter hosts a popular cooking show on the BBC and their home has become something of a tourist attraction."

"Good!" Ives exclaimed. "Maybe she can give me some cooking tips."

Presently the car turned off the country road and passed through open gates, following a paved driveway to the house itself. I suppose it was a fairly modest country home by Victorian standards, but its gables and cupolas were still impressive. We could see a pair of gardeners at work, tending to a variety of rose bushes in full bloom. Only the somewhat startling sight of a television remote unit with its antenna raised reminded us that the Victorian Age was long gone.

"Can you believe this place?" Ives remarked as we pulled up before the main entrance. A massive oak door was topped by a wooden banner with gold letters announcing *The Gingerbread House.* Almost at once the door swung open. If we were expecting a staid English butler to greet us, we were startled by the brisk young woman who ran down the steps to our car.

"Hello! I'm Veronica! And you must be Gretel!" She was tall and slender, with a mane of flowing black hair.

Ives had opened the back door and started out of the car, but she quickly froze in position and told the woman, "That's Gretel Domonick. I'm Juliet Ives."

Gretel emerged and accepted a polite hug from the young woman. "Mr. Stanton and Miss Ives are couriers. They'll be taking the Handel material back to the States for me."

"So glad to have you all! Come, you must meet my mother."

We followed her into the entrance hall with its grand staircase leading to the second floor. I wouldn't have been surprised to see a suit of armor standing guard, but the decor was surprisingly modern. Perhaps it was Veronica's touch that had livened things up. "You'll love Mother when you meet her," she assured us. "Julia is

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the most fearless woman I've ever met—rock climbing, scuba diving, even bungee jumping!"

"Really?" Ives asked.

Veronica nodded, full of enthusiasm. "She went to New Zealand where the fad began. It was viewed as a test of courage down there and of course my mother had to prove herself. I guess I take after her in a way. After my divorce I was at loose ends and she urged me to develop this idea of a daily cooking show. I never would have done it without her support."

Mrs. Oldfield was awaiting us in the sitting room off the entrance hall. It was elaborately furnished like the rest of the house, with armchairs and a sofa grouped around a fireplace. An ornate desk could be seen through a second door that led to a little windowless office space. She was a small, gracious woman, with an almost queenly posture, who seemed younger than her sixty-odd years, dressed in corduroy trousers and a dark turtleneck sweater that no doubt helped hide an aging neck. "It's a pleasure to meet you at last, Gretel," she purred. "You've come a long way for the Handel material."

"It's well worth the journey," Gretel insisted, then introduced Ives and me. "Can you fill us in on some of the background?"

"If you can wait a bit, I'd like my solicitor to be present, just to be certain we cover all the details in our contract. He should arrive shortly."

I could see that Gretel wasn't too pleased with this latest delay. Lawyers have a way of complicating things. But about ten minutes later he arrived, out of breath as if he'd run from his car. "Sorry to be delayed," he told Mrs. Oldfield, ignoring the rest of us until we'd been formally introduced. He was a stocky man with a balding head and a bushy moustache perhaps meant to compensate for the scarcity of hair on top.

"This is Dennis Coxe," she told us. "He's handled my affairs for a number of years." She introduced us, coupling Ives and me with Gretel Domonick without really explaining our presence. "I was hoping my daughter Veronica could sit in too, but her cooking show goes on at eleven and she's busy with that."

"I saw *The Gingerbread House* sign over your door," I told her.

She smiled. "Veronica has her own studio here. She does her cooking show five mornings a week. I'm very proud of her. The show opens each morning with a shot of that sign."

The solicitor cleared his throat. "My time is limited, Mrs. Oldfield. Could we get on with this?"

"Certainly." She settled down to tell her story. As she spoke I had the impression she'd told it many times before, embellishing it as she went along. "Well, you all know George Frideric Handel, one of our greatest classical composers and a master of the Baroque era in music. He was born in Germany in 1685. By the age of seven-

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teen he was a cathedral organist, and later played the violin and harpsichord at the Hamburg opera house. He composed operas and other dramatic works in various Italian cities, but by 1711 he'd made his first journey to England. His operas were performed here and soon he'd entered the service of a British earl. By 1727 he'd composed four anthems for George II's coronation and became a British citizen. The remainder of his life needn't concern us. It was in 1717, on an early trip here, that he composed the *Water Music* to serenade George I at a river party on the Thames. This house was built in 1708, and I believe Handel stayed here on that visit. The house passed down to me through several generations. A few years back, while searching in the attic, I discovered a trunk filled with old papers. Among them was an early version of Handel's *Water Music* and other compositions by him."

"That's pretty much what you already told me," Gretel said. "Now I'm here to buy them and take them back to America with me, but I need a bit more background, something to tie Handel more firmly to this house."

"I have that," Julia Oldfield assured her, producing a heavy folded paper that proved to be a family tree. "You can see from this that the Oldfields were landowners here since the late sixteen hundreds. Baron Oldfield built this house in 1708 and he was a personal friend of George I. The best evidence that he stayed here is a portrait of him that hangs in the outer hall. Come, Gretel, and I will show you."

Naturally, Ives and I followed along. The portrait, showing the aging composer from the waist up in a white wig and formal jacket, his right hand resting on a walking stick, must have been painted long after his stay there at age thirty-one. But the background did show the entrance hall of the house with its grand staircase.

"That certainly proves he was familiar with this house," Gretel agreed. "Now we can get down to business."

The balding solicitor spoke up then. "Exactly what terms do you propose?"

"I thought that had all been settled," she answered, her face starting to flush. "I am to pay Mrs. Oldfield a consignment fee of fifteen thousand pounds to be transferred to her bank account. Once the documents' authenticity is verified by experts back in America, I will arrange for them to be auctioned to the highest bidder. All proceeds will be split evenly between us."

Dennis Coxe had a sour look on his face. "It seems to me that my client is getting the worst of this deal. I would suggest a commission no greater than twenty percent for your services, Miss Domonick."

"You forget that I am paying fifteen thousand pounds in advance, and I will be responsible for all publicity and expenses

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connected with this auction."

The color seemed to have drained from Mrs. Oldfield's face. "I agreed to the terms, Dennis. I only wanted you here as a formality, as a witness that I am delivering the Handel documents to Gretel here."

Ives and I were both anxious for a look at those documents, and Mrs. Oldfield was ready to oblige. She entered the little windowless office and unlocked the bottom drawer of the desk, taking out a flat portfolio such as an artist might use. Untying the ribbon that held it closed, she carefully lifted out several yellowed pages of sheet music. "Behold, *Water Music* and other examples of early Handel! If you wish to examine these sheets, Miss Domonick, I suggest you slip on a pair of these cotton gloves."

To my untrained eye, the pages seemed authentic enough. "Is this his signature?" I asked, pointing to an almost unreadable scrawl of letters beneath the lines of *Water Music* notes.

"That is his German signature," Mrs. Oldfield explained. "His original name was Georg Friederich Händel. He added the final 'e' to his first name and shortened his middle name in the English version."

"Do you keep them in that drawer?"

"I have a safe in the basement," she assured us. "I just brought them up this morning."

Gretel donned the gloves and gently turned the sheets of music with the notes all carefully inked in. Here and there I noticed a faded spot, but for the most part Handel's early work was in remarkably good condition. Gretel peeled off the gloves and opened her purse. "I have the phone number of my New York bank. I'd better call to have your fifteen thousand pounds transferred before they close for the day."

Dennis Coxe grunted. "Of course you won't be allowed to remove the Handel material until the wire transfer has been verified."

"We planned to spend the night," Gretel told him. "That's all arranged. Mrs. Oldfield will have the money by morning and we'll be on our way."

"Of course," Mrs. Oldfield said. "My guests might wish to view Veronica's television show in the meantime. I believe it's about to begin."

Ives and I exchanged glances as we followed Gretel and Veronica's mother down a hallway to the back of the house. Coxe stayed behind, apparently to contact the bank regarding our client's bank draft. I assumed we were headed for the kitchen, since *The Gingerbread House* was a cooking show, but we quickly passed by the working kitchen into a brightly lit area where stove and utensils were almost eclipsed by the television cameras. I could see Veronica up front by the counter, checking over her ingredients with an assistant.

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A slender man with gray sideburns and a pair of glasses hanging around his neck came forward to meet Mrs. Oldfield. "My dear Julia! We're always honored when you join us."

She went through the introductions again and I shook hands with Roderick Fine. He was the show's producer and appeared every weekday morning at nine to prepare for the eleven o'clock telecast. "Veronica is a wizard at this sort of thing," he confided to me. "Wait until you see her in action."

We settled onto a row of chairs at the rear of the makeshift studio as Roderick Fine warned us to turn off our mobile phones, then issued the final instructions for positioning the cameras and spoke to the director in the control room. They counted down the last few seconds to eleven o'clock, and the TV monitor came alive with a still photograph of the mansion's doorway and *The Gingerbread House* sign.

"Good morning, ladies!" Veronica shouted enthusiastically at the camera. "It's time once more for cooking tips from *The Gingerbread House!*"

Julia Oldfield was seated to my left and she whispered in my ear, "That should wake them up!"

Veronica pattered on about healthy dining, ending with a battle cry, "Let's make cooking fun again!" She announced that today's treat would be Irish potato pudding, and produced a half-dozen large potatoes in their skins, which she'd boiled the previous day. "Next you peel them, and grate them very lightly." She then produced six eggs which she made a brief show of juggling.

"You'll have to excuse me," Julia Oldfield whispered. "I should see how Dennis is getting on." She slipped out of her seat and went back the way we'd come.

I slid over one chair so I was next to Ives. "Learning anything?" I whispered.

She stretched out her long legs. "No wonder she doesn't have a husband."

"How do you know that?"

"No wedding ring. And she mentioned her divorce from Mr. Biel."

"Maybe she takes it off while she's preparing the food," I suggested.

But Ives wasn't buying it. "Remember," she whispered, "that the gingerbread house had a witch inside."

"Who's the witch, Mrs. Oldfield or her daughter?"

"We'll see."

Promptly at noon the cooking show ended, with Veronica toasting the audience with Champagne while inviting them to tune in tomorrow for the truth about pig's trotters.

"Good job!" Roderick Fine told her from his desk at the side of

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the set. "Keep it perky like that tomorrow."

Veronica merely sighed. "Rod, I've been doing the show for eighteen months."

The crew was shutting down the set, covering the cameras with plastic hoods. The counter, sink, and stove would have to be cleaned spotless for the following day's show, but that was someone else's job. The producer caught up with Veronica as she headed off the set, apparently wanting to talk about the next day's show, but she said they could go over it in the morning.

"Let's go back," Gretel suggested, and we followed along behind her. There were loud voices as we approached the parlor, and it sounded as if Julia Oldfield and her solicitor were having a disagreement. The voices cut off quickly as Veronica opened the door. "You should keep this locked if you don't want interruptions, Mother."

"How did the show go, dear?"

"Same as every day. Rod Fine is really getting on my nerves."

Mrs. Oldfield glared at Coxe. "Men. They're all alike."

The solicitor shuffled some papers into his briefcase. "I'll see you in the morning. I trust you won't do anything foolish with the Handel material until I arrive."

In the afternoon Veronica showed the three of us the estate, introducing us to the gardeners, who also looked after a pair of horses in the stable. "Mother and I like to ride," she explained. "We go out about three times a week, after my show."

"We're keeping you from it today," I said.

"No, no! Mother couldn't have gone anyway with all this business to attend to. Will you all be staying the night?" When I confirmed it, she looked at each of us and asked, "Two rooms or three?"

"Two rooms," Ives replied at once. "We don't often get to sleep together in a British mansion."

"Oh, it's hardly a mansion. We have only twenty rooms and even that has us in a financial bind. We're a bit small to run tours like some larger places do, although the cooking show would be a draw. I do what I can to support us, but my income can only go so far. That's why selling the Handel papers is so important to Mother."

"I assume you're divorced from Mr. Biel," Gretel said, openly prying. "He doesn't help you at all?"

She snorted. "Last I heard, he was running a car ferry across the Strait of Gibraltar. It's a wonder he doesn't ask me for money, now that my cooking show is a modest success. But come on and I'll show you the guest rooms."

We went up that great central staircase and Ives whispered, "If you were Clark Gable you'd carry me up."

"If I were Clark Gable you'd probably settle for right here on the carpet."

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Gretel's room was quaint and flowery, right at the top of the stairs. Ours was the next one down the hall, a bit more modern, with a fireplace that probably tied in with the one in the downstairs sitting room. "I'm trying to convince my mother to perk up these bedrooms a bit," Veronica told us. "Gretel's room is next on my list."

"I'm sure she can survive one night in it," I assured her.

"We'll be serving tea downstairs at four," she told us. "Dinner isn't until eight."

"Will we have the privilege of a Veronica Biel dinner?" Ives asked.

"Only Maggie the cook," she answered with a smile. "Doing that show wears me out. Sometimes on Sunday I cook for Mother, but that's all."

The four o'clock tea proved to be formal but enjoyable, with Ives choosing Earl Grey while Gretel went with a green tea. Mrs. Oldfield also chose Earl Grey. "It has a nice flavor to it," she explained. "They add a bit of oil from orange rinds to give it taste."

Veronica had joined us too, but her producer and Julia's solicitor had departed, so I was the only male at the tea party. Veronica did the pouring, from a flowery pot that must have been an heirloom. "It's a treat having a real Gretel at The Gingerbread House," she said.

Gretel, who'd obviously researched the subject, enlightened us. "You know in the original fairy tale the house was just plain."

"Gingerbread has a nice ring to it," Julia Oldfield insisted. "Bread alone could mean too many other things—even money."

"Well," Veronica observed, "this has certainly become a house of bread since you found the Handel compositions."

"Not yet, it hasn't. Not until Gretel can auction them off and get some real money for us."

Dinner was served by Maggie, a plump older woman who'd once been the pastry chef at a fashionable London hotel. Now her arthritis had made walking difficult and Veronica helped with the serving. The main course was roast duckling and I had to admit it was delicious. I could see that Ives was savoring it too. The conversation drifted onto Veronica's cooking show and she entertained us with stories of her greatest hits and near misses.

"I have to get my sleep," Julia Oldfield announced at ten o'clock. "You youngsters can stay up if you want." But by ten-thirty we'd all drifted upstairs to our bedrooms.

I'd just drifted off after some fun on the unfamiliar mattress when Ives woke me with a sudden poke. "Stanton, what was that?"

"I was asleep. What did it sound like?"

"A woman's scream from downstairs, right below us."

I remembered the fireplace. "That would be Mrs. Oldfield's sit-

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ting room. We'd better check."

The upper hallway was empty and apparently no one else had heard it. "What time is it?" I asked, hurrying down the stairs.

"Just before one."

I tried the doorknob of the sitting room but it was locked. There was moaning from inside, and I could hear Mrs. Oldfield's voice calling weakly for help. "Please, I'm bleeding—"

"Stand back," I cautioned Ives. "I'll try to break it open."

I threw my shoulder against it once, but it wasn't as easy as in the movies. I had to try three times before the lock began to splinter. Then, with a bit of help from Ives, it gave way and we were in the room. Julia Oldfield lay in a widening pool of blood near the little office. She'd been stabbed in the back.

I remember shouting to Ives to call the ambulance, then I ran to Julia's side to examine the damage. The weapon, an army bayonet, protruded from the center of her back. She must have tried unsuccessfully to remove it, causing bleeding from the enlarged wound. "Who did this?" I asked.

"Window," she managed to gasp, lifting a trembling hand toward one of the two windows on the north side of the room. But even this act was too much for her. She fell forward and the life seemed to drain from her as I watched.

"She's dead, Stanton," Ives announced with the certainty of a skilled physician, and I knew she was right.

After that, all was chaos. Gretel had been awakened by the noise of the breaking door and came downstairs moments later. Then Veronica appeared as the ambulance pulled up to the house. Even the cook Maggie was aroused from her slumber. I caught Veronica at the door to the sitting room and held her back from the sight of her mother's body. "Your mother has been killed," I warned her. "You don't want to see her now."

"Killed?" she repeated. "Who would want to kill Julia?"

Leaving Gretel and Ives to restrain Veronica, I went to the open window and looked out at ground that appeared too hard to take footprints. The ambulance techs confirmed that Julia was dead and reminded me that the crime scene needed to be secured.

Maggie had tottered off to make tea. Veronica and Ives were sitting on a sofa in an adjacent room, but Gretel had drifted away. Before the local police took charge, I wanted a word with our client.

"Gretel," I said, "did Mrs. Oldfield offer to sell you any other items?"

"No. I was only interested in the Handel papers."

"The murder weapon appears to be an old army bayonet. Some of those are extremely valuable."

"Great. Take it to *Antiques Roadshow*."

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"Hansel and Gretel saved their family with pearls and precious stones they found in the gingerbread house. Weren't you curious about any other collectibles that might be lying around?"

"No! I've been telling you—"

"Why would Julia Oldfield go to her sitting room at that hour? Maybe to meet somebody to offer the bayonet for sale. And you're the only potential buyer in the house."

Gretel shrugged. "Okay, she did ask me to come and see her. If I'd known it was to show me a bayonet, I could have told her I have no interest in military artifacts. But I wanted to keep her happy, make sure nothing happened to screw up our deal. That lawyer of hers worried me a little. I met her, we talked, she showed me the bayonet, I said no thanks, and I went back up to my room, leaving her still alive. When I left, I heard her lock the door behind me. If you think I murdered her, tell me how I could have got out of a locked room."

"By the open window. Julia Oldfield pointed me to it before she died."

"So I go out the window, get back in the house somehow, and dash back upstairs without being seen in the few minutes before you break down the door. How did I manage that?"

"Who do you work for, Gretel?"

"You don't need to know that."

"The police are going to ask you all these things, you know."

"You're not the police. Look, I represent parties who don't want their interests known, okay? Nothing illegal about it."

"Why couldn't you just carry the papers back yourself? Why do you need Stanton and Ives? We told you we're not bodyguards."

"Once we're allowed out of here, you just do your job. The Handel papers will be securely wrapped and placed in an attaché case I brought to carry them back. Before you leave, I'll tell you how and where to make the delivery when you get to New York."

"I thought you were traveling back with us."

"Change of plans. I have some other errands on the Continent."

"For these same anonymous interests?"

"Maybe. What does it matter?"

I shrugged. Ives was strolling toward us. She wasn't going to like our client any better when I passed along this new information.

"I'll be up in my room when I'm needed," Gretel said, and flounced off.

"How's Veronica doing?" I asked.

"Acting weird," Ives said. "Didn't have much to say."

"What did you talk about?"

"Nothing really. She's upset, but hardly grief-stricken. If this is a girl who just lost her mother, I'm Paris Hilton. So what were you and Little Orphan Annie chatting about?"

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I told her.

"That bitch! She never changed her plans. She never meant to go back with us. I think we're being scammed, Stanton."

"Scammed how?"

"I'm not sure, but I'll find out." Ives grinned. "At least if she's been scamming us, somebody else has been scamming her. Look what I found last night. I didn't know what it meant then, but I think I do now."

She passed over a wrinkled sheet of paper, possibly rescued from a wastepaper basket. At the top was printed "The Gingerbread House" and at the bottom in all capitals THE END. In between was a list of dates, with odd-sounding titles opposite. That the last two dates, yesterday's and today's, had the titles "Irish Potato Pudding" and "Pig's Trotters" gave me a clue to what the other designations must mean.

"Bubble and squeak," I read. "Devils on horseback. Jugged hare. Fat rascals. Toad in the hole. Don't tell me this is all food."

"Yep. Old-fashioned English cooking. I guess they compensated for the blandness when they were naming the dishes."

"Some of this stuff is borderline obscene. *Faggots? Spotted dick?*"

"That's suet pudding with currants. I looked it up in an old Mrs. Beeton's household-management manual I found in the library. English cooking is much more adventurous nowadays, but her recipes aren't exactly cutting-edge. Makes me wonder how a show as campy as *The Gingerbread House* could last on the BBC."

"You don't think that show we watched yesterday was a fake, do you?"

"No, too many people would have to be in on it, and what would be the point? The show exists all right, but I think it's been canceled. Veronica did her best, playing it for laughs—I mean, juggling eggs?—but she and her retro recipes must have worn out their welcome. That made the quick money from the sale of the Handel documents all the more urgent."

"Okay," I agreed. "But where's the scam?"

"Use your brain, Stanton. What did you think of that solicitor, Dennis Coxe?"

"Now that I did pick up on," I said, tired of being Watson. "He arrived late, then he wanted to hurry his client along. If British lawyers are paid by the billable hour, like they are back home, that's highly unprofessional behavior. And Julia changed her story about why Coxe was there. First it was to be sure we covered everything in the contract. Then when he revealed he didn't even know the terms of the contract, she said he was only there to witness the transaction."

"Right. Conclusions?"

"He wasn't really a lawyer and he knew nothing about the deal."

"And maybe neither did she. Because Gretel negotiated the con-

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tract with somebody else. Because the murdered woman was not Julia Oldfield. We both thought she looked awfully young to be Veronica's mother. Why do you think she wore that high turtleneck?"

"Vanity. To hide an aging neck."

"That can work two ways. Maybe she was hiding a too-youthful neck."

A young constable, somewhat out of his depth, had arrived to protect the crime scene. Until someone in authority came to begin the actual investigation, we remained free to talk among ourselves. We found Veronica sitting at the kitchen table staring into a cup of tea.

"Veronica," Ives said, "I realize the woman who was murdered tonight may be a close friend—"

"Close friend?" said Veronica in a monotone. "She was my mother."

"You can't keep up that pretense. The truth has to come out. The victim will be identified."

Veronica sighed. "Of course. I know that. I've been sitting here trying to figure out what to do."

"Tell the truth, to start with," I said. "Who is the woman who was killed?"

"Her name's Sarah McCandless. She's an actress friend. Sarah did a fine job for me, but look how it ended, with a bayonet in the back. She knew quite a bit about Handel already, and I filled her in on the house and the documents."

"And the solicitor, Dennis Coxe?"

"Her boyfriend, Bill Dunham. He meant well, but he really made a hash of things, didn't he? Sarah, trouper that she is, did her best to cover for him."

Ives nodded sagely. "I thought that 'men are all alike' crack suggested a closer relationship than attorney-client."

"How many people knew about this impersonation?" I asked Veronica.

"Maggie knew. No worries about her. Loyal, discreet, close-mouthed. Rod Fine knew Sarah was pretending to be my mother but not why. I told him it was a practical joke on an old school chum, and all he had to do was greet Sarah as if she were Julia."

"And exactly where is your mother?"

Veronica smiled faintly. "I really do love her, you know. But she's a bit daft and horribly stubborn. She agreed to the sale of the Handel papers, settled the terms with Gretel in a series of e-mails, set the date for Gretel to come and get them. And then she changed her mind, just like that. Said our ancestors would never want us to sell such a valuable family treasure, especially to allow it to leave the country. Said we should donate it to the British Library, if anything. Of course, I pleaded with her. 'Mother,' I said,

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'we need money. The BBC is canceling the program.'"

Ives threw me a smug glance.

"I'm not really such a creative cook," Veronica said, "and the old English recipes seemed fresh for a while but quickly reached their sell-by date. Anyway, Mother was adamant. The deal was off. After a few days of arguing, she got fed up and left on a hastily organized skydiving holiday. Once she was out the door, I checked her computer and discovered she had never e-mailed Gretel to cancel the deal. There was just time to arrange our little masquerade."

"You'll tell the police everything?" I said.

She shrugged. "I'll have to, won't I?"

The official investigation got underway in the person of a chief inspector who didn't appear much sharper than the clueless constable. While I waited my turn to be interrogated, Ives went upstairs for some "girl talk" with our client—considering their barely civil relationship, I didn't see much point. She wasn't gone long but looked smugger than ever when she returned.

"I was right!" she said.

"Right about what?"

"Gretel had brought two identical attaché cases in her luggage. I saw them on her bed before she chased me out. My guess is she was going to make a great show of carefully wrapping up the Handel papers, putting them in one of the attachés, turning it over with great ceremony, and then finding a chance to switch the two. Then she'd take the real documents to some European collector, leaving us with blank pages to turn over to whoever it was back in the States that sent her. If we're lucky, it was a legitimate dealer and not some leg-breaking mafioso who collects Handel memorabilia."

"She admitted this?"

"No, I said she chased me out. But she knew the significance of what I saw, believe me."

"Ives," I said sincerely, "you are a wonder."

"Yeah, sure," Ives said, "but we still don't know who killed the faux Julia and why."

My turn at last. "Don't we?" I said. "If Sarah McCandless was just performing as directed, why would she be trying to arrange other deals with Gretel in the dead of night? Maybe when she was getting the tour of the house in preparation for the masquerade, she saw some other things of value and saw a way to cash in on them. While Gretel was scamming us and Veronica was scamming Gretel, Sarah was all set to steal from Veronica. I think Veronica figured it out somehow. Maybe she couldn't sleep and was wandering around the grounds, saw Sarah with the bayonet through the sitting-room window, and tumbled to what was happening. She confronted Sarah, they quarreled, Veronica stabbed her with the bayonet and left as she had entered, by the window. When Veron-

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ica appeared after we knocked down the door, she could easily have come in from outside."

"How can you be so sure of all this?" Ives said.

"I never let Veronica enter the room. You didn't talk to her about the crime. No one else had contact with her apart from Gretel and Maggie, who didn't enter the room either. So how could she know a bayonet was the weapon if she didn't wield it herself? I think the police will be glad to hear about this."

Anxious to reveal my conclusions, I broke in on the interrogation of Veronica, but I was deflated to learn that the chief inspector was sharper than I thought. Veronica, voice raised in emotion, was already confessing to the murder.

"I should have realized I couldn't trust Sarah when I was showing her around the house. I should have understood that gleam in her eye. When I confronted her, she turned it around on me. I was a fool not to sell off the things of real value, she said. And she claimed the Handel papers were worthless fakes. Why, she wanted to know, would the great composer under commission by the king be stopping at a house as relatively humble as this one? What did that painting with a much older Handel really prove?"

"Was she right about the Handel papers?" the chief inspector asked.

"What did it matter? If she could influence Gretel to cancel the sale, everything I'd planned for would be destroyed by a false friend. I was wrong to be so trusting of Sarah. But she was a bit too trusting as well, turning her back on me as she did." Now Veronica was sobbing. "Mother was right after all. Selling the manuscripts was a terrible idea."

Stanton and I left for New York on schedule the next day. To our amusement, Gretel flew back on the same plane, empty-handed. When I asked about her travels on the Continent, she merely said her plans had changed and we would be paid our full fee even if we both slept all the way home. And so we did. ●

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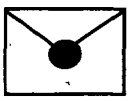

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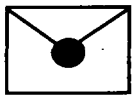

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Scarcely a year goes by without the appearance of a new Robert Barnard mystery. But some of his books have already become classics and this year Felony & Mayhem, dedicated to "bringing the best in bygone mysteries back to life," reprinted his 1984 novel Corpse in a Gilded Cage.

A Year to Remember

by Robert Barnard

"My, how time flies!" wrote Annette Bigsby, as she sat down on December thirteenth to compose the round-robin that, immaculately word-processed, would accompany her Christmas cards to friends and relations all around the world.

> *This last year has been one of all sorts. Some of the usual, which my correspondents will recognise: holidays in Majorca and Las Vegas, visits to Brighton, London, and Morocco. And then some of the unusual to balance them.*
>
> *One highspot of the unusual occurred in May. What could be nicer and more heartwarming than opening the door to a relative unseen for more than fifteen years? And how lovely that we could immediately strike up a rapport! That's what happened with my second cousin Malcolm Watts—only a teenager, but wise and generous beyond his years.*

Annette put down her pen. She would have to say more of Malcolm, but she wanted to strike the right note from the beginning. On reading it through she thought she already had struck a nice balance (as she would have put it) between the true and the misleading.

When she opened the door on that memorable day in May 2008 her main emotion was not the surprise which her letter, quite cleverly, led her readers to assume she felt. She had already had contact with Malcolm through the Families United Web site. She had responded unwillingly to his appeal, and in fact had only done so because it had been made clear that if he did not get the facts of his birth from the Web site he would get them from his adoptive mother, who was obviously as weak and indiscreet as Annette had always feared.

"More than fifteen" was also true but misleading. It was over seventeen years since mother and baby had been allowed home from hospital, three days after Malcolm's birth. After overnighting at Cousin Caroline's home she had kissed the boy goodbye (Cousin Caroline seemed to insist on it) and gone back to her own

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home in Peterborough.

"Am I what you expected?" asked Malcolm in his eager-puppy way.

"I'm not sure . . . I don't think I *expected* anything."

"I thought I might remind you of my father."

"Oh dear—that's so long ago. He was dead before you were born." And in truth, Annette could hardly remember anything about him.

"Dead? He must have been very young. How did he die?"

"It was a car crash. Tragic. Absolutely tragic."

"But you've married since?"

"*Been* married. At the moment I'm in a relationship. We're planning to marry, but we've just not got around to it yet."

"And you'd rather he and I didn't meet."

Annette flounced a little.

"I don't know why you say that."

"Because you specified times when I could come so exactly. They were obviously when he was at work."

"Well . . . well, yes. I didn't think Grant was quite ready yet."

"Ready?"

"Ready to be told."

Annette licked the tip of her Uniball pen and continued writing.

> *Professionally—on the job front, I mean—everything has gone like a dream. I am now well entrenched as head buyer at the Peterborough M & S, and enjoying enormously the work and the challenge. So much has been done in the last year or two to improve and brighten the store's women's clothing, and I am happy and proud to have been part of this. Grant, in his challenging and demanding job in securities, goes from strength to strength, and both of us seem to be on a steep upward curve.*

"Who was round here today?" Grant asked, when he got in in the early hours.

"Round here?"

"There were two cups and saucers on the draining board."

"Oh that. That was Peggy Hartley from marketing. She's been on to me to see the house, because she'd love to move to this area."

"What's so bloody special about these houses?" Grant asked. He had never so much as nodded to any of the neighbours, or shown any consciousness that they lived in a desirable neighbourhood. "It's just a freaking house."

"Well, it's two or three steps up from anything Peggy Hartley can afford. We do very nicely, Grant."

Grant grunted, and got down to what he did very nicely.

Annette nearly swallowed her Uniball before she got down to the first crux in her account of 2008. This needed careful handling.

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So those are the main outlines of my year. One of the joys has been the way the two strands have meshed. No sooner did Malcolm and Grant meet than they seemed to form a partnership—both taking enormous pleasure in each other's company. Grant has no family to speak of, unlike most Londoners. He has lost them through emigration, death, and some spending long periods away. (She thought, then crossed out the last six words and inserted an "or" before "death.") *So it was a particular joy to see how one of my few remaining relatives got on with the man who will be my husband. Goodness! We must make arrangements for the wedding soon!*

When Annette got back from work at twenty past five one July evening, Grant and Malcolm were eyeing each other off like two dogs meeting up with each other for the first time in a park. This time what she noticed about Malcolm was not his puppishness but his incipient manhood. The moment she came in Grant started getting together his gear for work: the tightly buttoned suit jacket over the padded waistcoat and the swagger stick. There was no sign of any refreshment having been offered to Malcolm.

"You got a visitor," said Grant, pausing bulkily by the door, an expression of disgust on his face. "I'll leave you to it."

"We can manage," said Malcolm.

"Yes, I'll give Malcolm a cup of coffee and then I have a lot of work on my plate for tomorrow. Be careful, darling."

"Oh, I'll be careful. Ain't I always? If I wasn't I'd be on Disability, and I wouldn't be able to keep you in the manner to which you are accustomed." He leered. "Have fun."

Annette busied herself in the kitchen to get her thoughts together, then brought coffee into the lounge.

"You arranged this, didn't you?" she said accusingly. "Coming here at a time when you knew I would be at work and Grant would be at home."

"How would I know that? You never told me he was a night worker." Seeing her thoughts, Malcolm changed his tactics. "All right, all right. You told me when not to come. And I kept watch on the house."

"What did you do that for?"

"To be able to come and see Grant in his natural habitat."

"I would have asked you to meet him eventually."

"You'd have given him directions how to behave, covered over all his rough edges."

"Does Grant look like somebody I could tell how to behave?"

"He might have made an effort. I wanted to meet the real him."

"Well, now you have." She didn't ask what he thought of him, but he told her just the same.

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"Mum—"

"Don't call me that."

"We're alone, Mum. And I didn't tell him. I'm your cousin Caroline's son as far as he's concerned. He's a violent man, Mum. There's aggression bubbling away under the surface the whole time. Does he hit you?"

"No, he doesn't! The idea!" lied Annette.

"Well, I wonder at you. You've got loads of class, and he's just a common night-club bouncer."

"Casino. That's quite different. He's in charge of security at a very well-thought-of casino, part of a chain."

"Well, swipe me. Actually, Mum, I don't give a damn what he does for a living. What I care about is the atmosphere of violence he carries around with him. He's an eruption waiting to happen. And then he spouts a lot of nonsense about keeping you in the lap of luxury."

"He earns a very good wage. It's a dangerous job. And the house takes a lot of upkeep. It's the age when the plumbing and the electricity start going wrong, and the Council Tax is horrendous."

Light dawned.

"It's yours, isn't it, Mum? Your house."

"Yes. What of it? I got it with my divorce settlement—*with* a mortgage to match. If it hadn't been for Grant I'd have had to sell it."

"How did you meet him?"

"At the casino. It's a nice place to go. You don't have to be a big gambler. There's a really good restaurant, and it's the same to them if you bet high or if you're cautious, like me. I like it there."

Malcolm came over and took her in his arms.

"Mum, you were lonely, weren't you? After your divorce. You were just a well-off widow waiting for some lounge lizard to get his claws into you."

"Grant is not a lounge lizard," Annette said weakly.

"A lounge Rottweiler, then." Malcolm pushed her away so that he could look into her eyes. "Mum, I worry about you. I don't care how violent he is towards the other punters—"

"Don't be silly. You're ignorant. How could he be violent towards the casino's best customers? He'd be out on his ear in no time."

"All I'm saying, Mum, is you need someone to protect you. I'm glad I came along in time."

Annette smiled satirically.

"Malcolm, dear, you're seventeen. I'm sure one day you'll be a very capable man, but at the moment you're not—"

"I'm not taking him on at all-in wrestling, Mum. He's got all the muscle. What I've got is brain."

Annette said nothing. She really didn't know about his brain one way or the other. Malcolm drew her closer to him.

"Mum, you've got me to rely on."

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One sadness was Malcolm's inability to come on our holiday with us. He was just too busy looking for a job. I know he's going to find one where he will do well, and he's quite right to be choosy, because he's a very personable young man. We went back to Vegas—as I call it now—where we were so happy last year. It's not the gambling that attracts us: Grant gets enough of that in his job. It's the whole atmosphere, the feeling of something exciting going on all the time. So we don't lose much money—in fact Grant made a very nice "killing" this year. But that's not something we'd rely on doing another year—we're not so daft.

"This is better than having your tame puppy along," said Grant as the plane neared the U.S. coastline and he opened his third little bottle of whisky.

"He's a very nice puppy," said Annette, who was herself slightly squiffy from white wine.

"Tell me again what relation he is."

"He's my cousin Caroline's son."

"Legitimate, is he? All fair and square? Not wrong side of the blanket, or adopted, or babynapped from some unsuspecting couple?"

"Of course he's legitimate. What kind of daft idea are you getting?"

"Only when you've mentioned your cousin Caroline earlier, you've never mentioned any husband."

"Can't we give Malcolm a rest? You've gone on about him quite enough in the last few weeks. We're off on holiday."

"Right. And it's going to be a cracker. I'm mainly going to watch. That's how you become a winner in casinos. You keep your eyes open. I've got all the background now, from A to Zed—or Zee as those Yanks say. Just watch me!"

Strangely enough, his exultation did not make Annette feel happy.

But in the next few days she did what he'd ordered: She watched him. They played the tables a little, made a few friends among the English contingent in the hotel, and Grant kept his eyes open. By the second day he was concentrating on one of the croupiers, occasionally playing at his wheel, more often watching from a distance. It was slow work. They only had ten days, but it was the seventh day before Grant said to Annette, whose uneasiness had been growing:

"That croupier is bent."

"Oh Grant! I'm sure he's not. It's the best-run casino in Vegas—everyone says so."

"Makes no difference. He's bent. And I know what he's been doing."

"But Grant—be careful! Please, please be careful. It could be dangerous. There could be large sums involved."

"You're mental, woman. Of course there are large sums involved. There better be. Why do you think I'm interested? Just do exactly—and I mean exactly—what I tell you. That, and nothing more."

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The following evening, when Annette was dressing for dinner, Grant said:

"Don't bother to dress. You're staying in this room tonight. I need you to be here."

"But Grant, I—"

"Ring room service if you're hungry. And make sure everything is packed. Yours and mine. Everything."

"But Grant, it's only Tuesday. We don't go until—"

"DO WHAT I SAY. Can I be clearer than that? Do what I say and we're made."

And he left the room.

It was inevitable, only a matter of time, that she would follow him, find out what he was up to. If he had understood her better he would have known this, but he had known her mainly in bed, when he came home until she went to work, and on her occasional visits to the casino. She was already dressed, so she used half an hour to pack as he had ordered her to do, then thought it was safe to go out. She knew the table he would be watching, or playing at, and she stood in the shadow of a plastic marble pillar to watch. He was playing and he was losing. But he was not getting bad-tempered, aggressive, as he usually did. He was watching carefully, especially when the croupier's eyes were turned away from him. He exuded, to Annette's experienced eye, an air of enormous satisfaction.

The croupier changed at ten, and true to habit he went off to one of the many bars. Annette watched from a distance, and saw Grant nonchalantly follow him—casually, as if he could have chosen any other of the bars to go to. Annette went closer, and Grant, holding a glass of lager—he despised cocktails, and thought spirits dangerous when he was on a job—was apparently just having a breather between sessions. But in fact he was watching the croupier exchanging low words with a thick-set man who seemed to talk with both his hands—an Italian, Annette felt sure. When he had said goodbye the croupier looked at his glass, seemed about to down it, but found a man by his left shoulder.

It was Grant. Annette, who had taken her eyes off him, was as surprised by his move as the croupier. Grant's mouth went towards the man's ear and he began talking. Annette saw the man swallow (his Adam's apple did a high-jump), then she saw fear in his eyes, saw him clutching a briefcase protectively, clearly fighting back but on a losing wicket.

That was the danger signal. Ten minutes later she was back in the hotel room, languidly seeming to read a book. Then minutes after that Grant was back, clutching a briefcase very like the croupier's.

"Okay. The hotel bill's been settled up. We're out of here. Taxi to the airport. Right?"

"Oh yes, Grant. Just my coat. But I don't see why—"

"You don't have to. DO. No time for questions. We'll get any plane

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going to Britain. Or Europe if we have to. Right. Away."

Two hours later they were on a KLM plane going to Amsterdam. Annette had not asked any more questions and Grant certainly had not answered them unprompted. But once the plane took off he was in high good humour, drinking in moderation (a good sign) and chaffing the hostesses.

"We're made," he said, as once more they flew over the East Coast and out to the Atlantic. "Well, not made. But we will be. It worked!"

She still didn't ask any questions. She didn't need to.

We were just settling down again, modestly enjoying our little windfall, and back at our dear old home—because we're both home-birds at heart, in spite of demanding jobs—when Grant was selected for the sort of job that you can't refuse, if you're ever going to get ahead in the organisation you work for. It was opening a new branch in Peking, which has a new name I can't spell. We talked it over, back and forth, but in the end there was no choice: He had to go. It was upsetting, but I knew our love would survive a period of separation. I sobbed and I kissed him goodbye in a little patch of woodland off the A15 which meant a good deal to us. Malcolm drove me back home, sobbing my heart out.

"Malcolm, it's awful. I don't know what to do. He's so *changed*. It's all this money. I keep warning him. What if they don't accept what's happened? What if they send someone after him? A—what do you call it—a hit man? He just shrugs and says it wasn't that much money. But I've seen it in his briefcase. It's thousands and thousands. I'm so *afraid.*"

"Would it be so dreadful if he did take off for a bit? Let things cool down?"

"Leaving me here if the hit man arrives. You hear of things happening—people being tied up and tortured for what they know."

"You could insist he takes you with him."

"Well . . . no. No, I couldn't." Ringing in her ears was Grant's response to that suggestion: "Time I had a change. Swapped you for a newer model. Well past that time, if the truth were known."

"Right. So the scenario is: You're here terrified while he swans off to places unknown. He probably won't even tell you where he's gone. Safer . . . I did warn you about him, Mum."

Annette's mouth had dropped.

"But that would be awful. If they were torturing me to find out where he'd gone, and I didn't even *know,*" wailed Annette.

"Better for him, though. When's he thinking of going?"

"End of the week. He wants to stay in with the casino people. He says that they're the basis of his future prosperity."

"Just leave it to me, Mum. Leave it to me."

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The next day Malcolm rang the front doorbell at two o'clock, just about the time, he knew, when Grant woke up to a new day.

"What do you want, squirt?" Grant asked, with elephantine jocularity.

"I've got a bit of a proposition for you," said Malcolm.

"Oh yes? What kind of proposition would interest me, coming from you? But I suppose you'd better come in." Once Malcolm was in the lounge Grant reluctantly asked: "Want a drink?"

"Coffee would be fine."

"Oh? Too early in the day for a Scotch?" But he went into the kitchen and gave Malcolm the time to do what he had to do with the half-empty bottle of whisky on the shiny new bar in the corner.

"It's instant. I can't do with bloody percolators," said Grant, coming back. "Now what's this proposition?"

"Look, I'm only in this for my mother. I want to spare her heartbreak."

Grant, pouring himself a Scotch, turned round with a sneer on his face.

"Heartbreak? Spare me the sobbing violins. I could ask you what dear Cousin Caroline has to do with this, but I've always suspected. I'm not as dim as people think."

"I knew you would have guessed. You're very good at jumping to obvious conclusions, I would think. Now, I imagine you're going to slink out of here on Thursday or Friday, while Mum is at work, and I guess you have plans to take anything in the house that will fetch a bit of money. It would be against your nature to leave anything of value behind."

Grant had downed his neat Scotch, and now poured himself another.

"Why would I bother? I've got the Vegas money."

"Very nice, I'm sure. But when did having money stop people like you from wanting a bit more, if it was easy pickings? . . . Are you all right?"

Grant sat down heavily.

"I don't know . . . I've never . . ."

"No, I don't suppose you have," said Malcolm. He sat still and waited. There were coughs, heaving stomach, dribbles from the mouth, and Grant never regained anything that could be called consciousness. When he was at last undeniably dead Malcolm began the difficult business of dragging the body through the house, then through the connecting door that led to the garage—making his task blessedly easier—then stuffing Grant on the floor of the backseat of the car, Grant's own BMW. Everything was nice and tidy by the time Annette came home.

"Malcolm—what are you doing here?"

"Solving your problem." He smiled, with the satisfaction of a young achiever. "He was never any good for you, was he, Mum? You

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got involved, and then you found you were up to your ears, and with no means of escape."

"Well, I—"

"He used you and abused you. It's been a nightmare for you. It's over now, Mum. Now all we have to do is get rid of him."

Annette swallowed.

"You mean the body, don't you?"

"Of course I mean the body. It's not going to be easy, digging the grave. The ground's still hard from summer. I shall need your help. Know any piece of land where we could be private?"

"There's a bit of woodland just off the A15. It has . . . associations. It was where—"

"Don't go into that, Mum. It'll be dark by half-past five. We'd better leave it a bit later, though. It'll be a piece of cake, you'll see."

And it was. They put on old clothes (castoffs from the separated husband for Malcolm) and brought spades from the garden shed. Annette knew the way to the little wood by heart, and they had the grave ready after an hour's digging. She kissed the lips of the corpse (an unnecessary touch, Malcolm thought), and they rolled him in and covered him over. Then Malcolm trailed brambles and ivy over the earth he had stamped flat, and they set off for home. Malcolm stayed the night, in one of the spare bedrooms.

I thought I was going to be lonely, and of course I do *miss Grant so very much, but, by coincidence, my nephew Malcolm has been doing work experience in Peterborough, in the dispensary of Boots the Chemist's, and he has moved in, at least until Christmas, when he will have to make a decision about his future. He's a lovely boy, and he's invaluable about the house. He keeps saying he's going to take care of me, and it's lovely that he wants to!*

It only remains to wish you all—

Annette, as she wrote the last words, was conscious of a presence behind her, and she looked round to see a smiling Malcolm. He had just come down from counting, for the umpteenth time, the dollar notes in the late Grant's briefcase. There were plenty of them, in fifties, but with the exchange rate having plummeted of late he wondered if there was enough to finance his plans, whether something else substantial, say property, might not be needed.

"That's lovely, Mum," he said when he had read through the letter. "We'd better cut out that bit about the A15, but you've got the tone just right. Everyone will be happy to receive that. And the last words are spot on. You've got me now, and I'm really going to take care of you."

She felt his young hand caressing her shoulders and arms, and felt wonderfully, deliciously safe. ●

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BLACK MASK

THE KIM NOVAK EFFECT

by Gary Phillips

Here I was, running a sweet little hustle, not really hurting anybody, and yet I find myself strapped spread-eagle, chest down, across a piece of three-quarter-inch plywood plunked across two sawhorses. My pinpoint Oxford Raffaello shirt was in tatters. This gruff corn-fed ol' boy in a cowboy hat standing behind me, ready to wail on my bare, bleeding back again with his heavy-buckled belt. The other ruffian leaned on a beam of the unfinished wall of the tract house. This one bopped his head to *The Best of Warren Zevon* playing on his iPod.

"'Roland, the Headless Thompson Gunner,'" Leaning Man mouthed as Hat Boy took another chunk out of me. "Talkin' about the man . . ." He smiled, absently scratching his threadbare beard. He took another swig of his bottled water.

Hat Boy cocked back again like Roger Clemens goofy on the juice and let another one go. The leather sizzled on my flesh and the edge of the buckle dug another groove.

"Ke-Rist," I screamed into the gag tied around my mouth.

"He looks about primed," Leaning Man said, yawning. He straightened from the skeletal wall, wire conduits snaking through the holes cut into the framing lumber. He removed his earpieces and methodically wrapped them around his iPod. He then placed it carefully on a juncture of wood beams.

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"Yeah?" Hat Boy said dubiously. "A few more love taps would make sure."

Eager bastard.

"He's got to be conscious when Bishop George gets here," Leaning Man pointed out. "That sonofabitch'll skin our hides if sugar lips here isn't conscious."

"I suppose," his compatriot agreed reluctantly. He wiped at his forehead with his forearm, the Vegas heat particularly stuffy inside the raw plywood shell of the house's second floor. Despite this, Leaning Man wore a bulky nylon windbreaker, shades, and a baseball cap.

We were in what the blueprints indicated was the master bedroom—the homes in development on one of the higher plateaus of Red Rock Canyon. On the other side of the ridge, down in the womb of a valley, was an eighteen-hole golf course I frequented. Beyond that was the tail end of Summerlin, this where my latest operation was bivouacked.

Leaning Man walked over and doused my back with what was left of his water. It wasn't much, but I was mutely thankful. Funny how things work out, I reflected, as we waited for the big boss to arrive. Less than two weeks ago, my golf game was improving, my off-shore bank accounts were fat, and I was in my office doing, with gusto I might add, the wonderfully preserved late-'70s sexpot Jerri Rocklyn. She of the *Ava of the Underground* WWII actioners, wherein each installment included heady doses of sadomasochism.

"Thank you, kind sir," she joked as we finished up. On the lower right cheek of that gorgeous Nautilus firmed butt of hers was the mole made famous in the photo layout the real Jerri Rocklyn had done for *Gallery,* one of the slick skin mags, back in '78. Looking dreamily from that image I gazed out of my office window, which offered a view of Rainbow Boulevard. Life sure was good.

Back in her clothes, Jerri sat on my desk crossing tanned, muscular legs. She lit a blunt and inhaled. Her real name was Helen Hobart. She was thirty-six years old, originally from Redondo Beach, California. But for the escapade we'd just pulled, she'd been modeled to look like Rocklyn, whom she happened to favor.

"Do I really have to go back under?" she asked, blowing fumes and offering me a toke.

I took the joint, sampled it, then answered, "We can't have the mark spotting you at the craps table, now, can we?"

She sighed heavily, getting off the desk with a flourish, those marvelous gel-filled breasts of hers swaying hypnotically. "But I like this look. And so do you." She sucked in more smoke and put

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the joint on the edge of the desk.

I stepped forward and we kissed while she guided my fingers slowly along her leg. Momentarily lost in lust, I eventually got back on track. "Doc's ready to go, baby. And we've already agreed you can keep the tatas," I murmured as I nibbled her scented neck.

"But," she started, then didn't finish. She knew I couldn't force her to get re-cut. But she also knew it would mean the end of any future lucrative assignments if she insisted on keeping the Jerri Rocklyn look. For like me, Helen was addicted to those pretty little green ones.

"Fine," she said, giving me a last peck and sauntering out of my office after putting the dead blunt in her handbag. I checked my appearance in the mirror of my tiny private bathroom, making sure my hair was just so and my eyes weren't red from the weed. Then I opened the floor safe beneath the rug upon which sat a cylindrical glass case of sports memorabilia I'd pushed aside. I took out the acrylic-encased page from the 7/21/73 program book of the Braves versus the Phillies at Atlanta. I smiled crookedly, like Mel Gibson speaking at a synagogue, and put everything back in its place. Aluminum attaché case in hand, I left.

Not forty minutes later I was sitting across from retired dental-clinic king Eldon Dudley in the Blue Velvet Lounge on Bridger. In fact, there was a Dr. Dudley Discount Dental facility several blocks away on this street. His big smiling face, circa thirty years ago, beaming down on the abscess-plagued and broken-toothed citizenry from the 3-D logo.

"Wonderful," Dudley said, examining the inauthentic certificate of authenticity I'd laid on him. I was especially proud of the hologram work on that bad rascal. That lab in Taiwan knew its stuff. He picked up the encased program page again, savoring the item. On that date in 1973, Hank Aaron hit home run number 700 in his irrefutable quest to equal, and eventually surpass, Babe Ruth's home runs. Say what you want about Barry Bonds, Hank did it without 'roiding up, while also putting up with racist death threats from jealous crackers. Sure I was a con artist, but I could appreciate the real thing when it came along.

Scouring, as I do, antiques stores and estate sales, I'd chanced upon the actual program book from that auspicious day. The rest, faking Aaron's signature and the certificate, then working the network I'd established for high-end sports memorabilia, was simply reeling in the right fish.

"Okay," he said, sipping his cranberry juice. "You've got yourself a deal."

"This," I said, reverently touching the artifact, "is not only a wise investment on your part, but a legacy to leave your children."

He snorted. "My grandkids, maybe. 'Fraid my son and I don't see

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eye to eye," he lamented.

He was like that, regurgitating those clichéd homilies now and then. I said nothing, merely sat back, tenting my fingers as he wrote a check for fifteen grand. The waitress came by our table.

"Can I get you gentlemen refills?"

"I believe we'll settle up," I said, adding after the right pause, "Noreen, is it?"

Dentist Dudley looked up from his checkbook.

"Yes, it was my grandmother's name." She put on a neon smile and glided away in her skimpy outfit after laying the tab on us. Naturally I picked it up. Dudley stared after her.

"You okay?' I asked.

"Yes, uh-huh," he said, handing me the payment. "Was she our server originally?"

I hunched my shoulders. "Maybe her shift just started." I rose and said my goodbye, reassuring him once again about the timeliness and efficacy of his investment. I strolled out, sure that he was staring at the waitress named Noreen as I passed near her. She was earning her tips laughing politely at the inane *Girls Gone Wild* level of word foreplay of a couple of 'SC frat boys. I'm sure they were in Vegas to show us hairy-knuckled droolers how to party. I got in my platinum-colored 300, put on the factory air and a Celine Dion CD—what can I tell you, I actually like the way that broad belts out a tune. I drove over to the kitchen of a downtown casino to make a pickup. Then out to see my man.

Dr. Mathias Steiner was the cat you'd cast to play the Nazi doctor if you were of a mind to make another *Ava of the Underground* flick. He was about medium height, stocky, with good-sized shoulders even at his age. Apparently back in the day he wrestled at Dusseldorf U or whatever the institution in Germany he attended was called. He wore a pencil moustache, touched up his gray locks, and his fashionable rimless glasses stood in relief over his steel-blues. His hands were long like a pianist's, and it annoyed me to no end that his golf game was better than mine, even though he had a couple'a decades on me.

"I'll have Shauna call Helen. I'll schedule her for the day after tomorrow," he told me in the hallway of his cut shop after his new receptionist had buzzed me into the back.

"Where'd this one come from?" I said, meaning the new receptionist called Shauna. She was a statuesque hottie I took to be no more than twenty-four or -five. Once upon a time, Helen had been his receptionist.

Steiner took my elbow and guided me toward his open office. He liked nothing better than thinking about, touching, smelling, and pursuing women. He had an invalid wife. While he was a sucker for female flesh, he did right by the wife when it came to care and whatnot, so he wasn't a total ogre.

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"Shauna Cheung. She's studying Economics and Nineteenth Century English Lit at UNLV." We were standing just inside his office and he gazed around the room as if worried his wife had planted a bug. "She made her college money with one of those Web sites where you watch her in the morning, rant about her boyfriend, feed the cat, and all that." The tip of his tongue wet the center of his top lip as he grinned. "Of course she did these tasks mostly in short nighties and silken underthings, earning quite a few male and female subscribers."

He tipped back momentarily on his heels as he conjured up those carnal cyber images in his head.

"You hint to her about our sideline?" I asked, conversationally. Her online thing struck me as someone who had a taste for larceny. Or maybe she was just a stone exhibitionist. Either way, she seemed to be a likely candidate.

"Not yet, but yes, she certainly seems prime material. There must be plenty of these bourgeois fools who have fantasies about the Asian goddess or Dragon Lady."

Steiner was a study in contradictions. He justified his arrangement with me as a way to strike back at the nabobs of convention and conformity. Going on about his patients, the vain, jowled men and the sun-aged, vodka-breathing blondes deluded they could defy gravity and time. Yet I also knew he was spiteful that he got the low-rent chin nip or outpatient tummy tuck, with the high-end work those vodka blondes wanted flying out to Beverly Hills to get done.

"Here you go," I said, laying the packet of blow on his desk. That was the item I got from my connection at the casino. Women weren't Doc's only weakness.

He put the dope away, relocking the drawer. Randolph Scott looked down on us from behind him. Steiner was also a movie cowboy aficionado, and had several such portraits—Glenn Ford, the Duke, Eastwood, and so on—tacked to the walls. All of them were autographed. I'd sold him his Ford. Hey, Western memorabilia brings in a decent buck.

"Noreen make contact?" We were walking back out of his office.

"Yeah," I said. "I still think it was too dead-on to use the name of his dead wife."

"We all want to believe that the second chance can be had," he said wistfully. "The heart forever overrules the intellect, does it not?"

I demurred. Since my research had shown the dentist was into mysticism, it did seem Dudley was more inclined to fall for the bit the more he glommed that this Noreen could be the spirit of his departed. This was the first time we'd done the Kim Novak this nose-on, and I hoped it didn't jinx the con.

Shaking Doc's hand in front of the receptionist, it looked like I

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was simply some sort of pharmaceutical salesman making his rounds. Which in a way was true. I gave her a nod and she returned that with a brief smile that could be interpreted a couple of different ways. Could be Doc had let on more than he allowed. Yes by golly, she was a candidate.

The slap across my face brought me out of my daydreaming and back into my current unpleasant situation.

"Got your attention now, asshole?" Hat Boy followed his question with a jab from his steel-toed boot into my chest. They'd untied me from the makeshift table and dumped me in a corner. A brief wind rippled the blue plastic covering the cutouts for the windows.

"The bishop will be here soon," Leaning Man said, pocketing the cell he'd been talking on. He crossed his arms and looked down at my pitiful form. "Then we'll get down to it, won't we, sugar lips?"

I feebly managed to give them the finger. Instead of knocking the crap out of me, which I expected, Hat Boy and Leaning Man laughed like they were watching a Chris Rock routine. Hell, why not? They were holding all the cards.

I know I should pace my intake. I am a doctor, for God's sake. Once I was in demand, and know more than some windshield-washing addict what this heavenly narcotic does to you physically and mentally. But the feeling it purveys, that, well, that is almost like sex itself, is it not?

I know too that as I sit here in the tomblike dark of my office, Wagner softly on my stereo, the hum of the thoroughfare beyond a desensitizing lullaby of normalcy, current matters are far from that. And yet a kind of throttle of inertia embraces me as I ingest more powder, my self-image that of the immigrant gangster Pacino played in that movie all those rappers sample. The cocaine gives me spine. The coke will give me the *eier* to reach for the pistol in my middle drawer should I need to.

This I must believe because I know my erstwhile partner in the doppelgänger enterprise is not a heroic man. I dip my head and partake of more of the powder. Mein Gott, it is an amazing substance. I wipe the residue from the rim of my nostrils and lick some left off the back of my index finger. I certainly don't mean to say that he is a coward. You can't be gutless and perpetrate the sort of bold swindles he pulls off. You have to project the veneer that reflects what the person you're taking wants to see, and he certainly has that.

But what am I to him? I, who used to be a surgeon and now cre-

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ate cartoon heart-shaped derrieres for the self-perpetuating, self-absorbed class. I have more coke and I wait. I could go downstairs and get in my Cadillac CTS with the temperature-controlled seats and the surround sound, the vehicle purchased from the profits I made doing my part, but where would I go? I am very comfortable in my newly obtained condo in nearby Summerlin. And really, as I have more coke and analyze it further, I am an asset, am I not?

Here I was, having driven to his office to tell him the important news I'd discovered about Shauna, anxious as I was not to speak on the phone. Cocaine makes one wary. But then spying that large one with the cowboy hat taking him away forcibly. The other one I couldn't see so well at the wheel of their car. Together those Macheaths will squeeze my name along with the other particulars of the operation out of him. What if they aren't giving him the works, and will simply offer him money? Or drugs. The judicious use of psilocybin or scopolamine, that would disorient him or create fright or paranoia and that could get him babbling as well.

Yet when he does give them my name, why would they give me the treatment? It would seem to me their boss would want to keep me in the picture, assuming he wants to keep the effort going. And why wouldn't he? Whoever was in charge of the hoodlums must be a man of means, a gangster of some sort, surely. Unless it was over a personal matter that he was taken away as he was. That might be. And if so, then all my worrying is unfounded, and I should cease my consumption. I will, just after this next line.

"You do have amusing qualities," Shauna Cheung said condescendingly. She set her margarita down on the pub table and fluffed out those raven tresses. "But why should I kick back anything to you or to Herr Doktor?" She put a finger up. "More than, say, the cost of getting the remodeling done, as you call it, and some sort of finder's fee? Though when you really think about it, why are you necessary at all?"

I pantomimed for two more drinks from the waitress in the faux-moll outfit. The third-floor game room in the Riverhead Casino was called Nitti's. Leaning just so across the pool table, Shauna steadied herself and smacked the cue ball dead-on. She dropped her solid into the awaiting hole. I appreciated a woman who could work the stick. She walked to the short side of the table, eyeing her next shot.

"It's not just setting the job in motion that matters," I said. "But lining up the marks does take a certain specialty." That had come out more harshly than I'd intended. I couldn't let this chick get ahead of me. "But sure, you're right, you don't need me. Only, who's gonna soothe that old croaker sack's nerves when you're off

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playing slap and tickle with the mark? Riddle me that, Green Hornet."

"It's not hard to find a crooked cutter," she said. "Half of them are sniffing their Xylocain or whiffing their patient's panties . . . or want to."

The cue ball glanced off the solid seven and it spun on its axis but didn't have much trajectory. She left me with much of nothing on the table but I was cool. I positioned myself confidently. "You figure to branch out with my idea, that it?"

She smiled radiantly. "I'm not saying that, homeboy. I could see where you might be an asset."

"Now you're just jerking me to make me miss." I did anyway. My striped ball bounced off the padded corner.

She lined up her next shot. "No. But I was thinking this hustle could be a two-way thing."

"How you mean?"

"There're plenty of lonely widows, you know. Fact is, statistically, there's more older broads with some savings than older men." She let loose with her cue stick and, banking her shot, knocked in another solid.

"I'm not taking the denture-cream money from some gummy grannies. That is not what this is," I insisted.

"My bad." She gave me that smile of hers again, well aware that it got to me despite my anger. "The point remains, you're not tapping your market's full potential."

"Maybe that's where you come in," I suggested. "Lining up some of these beefcake boys for the work."

She seemed to consider that while she sunk her last solid. "Who knows? I might take a semester off and show you how to properly expand your operation." She pointed the cue stick at the middle pocket and put the eight ball away in a smooth stroke. "See you, champ."

I stood watching her walk away, allowing as she did a bit of a swing of those wonderful hips in those designer jeans. Yeah, Ms. Cheung was a real go-getter. And if I wasn't careful, she was going to run me like she did this pool game, and put me out of the picture.

"Really, you don't need to keep doing this."

"It's my pleasure to see that look on your face," I said.

She yawned and stretched on the bed. The diamond and white-gold pendant I'd just given her was resplendent against her magnificent bronzed skin. Noreen—and I understood she wasn't that Noreen, the woman I met in those days of want in Tulsa—pulled me closer from where I stood gazing down on her.

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"How will I ever thank you," she giggled, reaching for my boxers. Oh these modern women. I was glad I no longer wore the traditional undergarments. Much too much fuss to get out of. She laid back on the bed again, giving me an eyeful of that young and fit body of hers clad only in the frilly panties I'd bought her. What a self-deluding fool I was. How pathetic I must be to this gorgeous girl who could have her way with any of those snarling boys with their bunching pectorals prowling Vegas to satiate hedonistic desires. Yet here I was, a slave to my baseness.

"What's wrong, baby cakes?"

I sat on the edge of the bed and she snuggled close. "I'm not so gone that for one minute I would suppose you have real feelings for me," I began, touching her hair. "Sending orchids and chocolate bunnies to you at that bar and grill like some teenager." I wiped a hand over my face. "Why did you agree to see me?"

"You have to stop doubting yourself, Eldon. I told you. Men my age have grown up playing video games blowing up monsters and making it with digitally animated babes with balloon boobs. Salivating over how they can get a house like they've seen on *MTV Cribs* and a car featured on *Pimp My Ride.*"

She kissed my far too rotund belly. "I was and still am flattered a man of your experience would find me of interest."

I grabbed her by the shoulders, tighter than either of us expected. "What if I'm crazy, Noreen? I know full well you aren't her, she died some thirty years ago. There's plenty of Noreens in this world, and no doubt a fair share in Las Vegas. And sure you favor her some, but she never had a body like yours or—"

I stopped myself, ashamed and excited all at once.

"She never did this, did she, Eldon?" She pushed me onto my back and demonstrated a technique, shall we say, I'd never experienced before in sixty-seven somewhat sheltered years. Then she had me reciprocate. Oh my. But I believe that's what the article I read in the *AARP* magazine advocated—to keep your mind active in the Golden Years, you should learn something new every day to keep sharp. Well I was a damn needle that night.

Afterward, as we got dressed for dinner, I asked her, "When you decide to leave me, do it quickly, will you? I've convinced myself I can take it easier like that, as if it were a gut punch, okay?"

"Why do you always talk like that? And why would I leave someone who is so kind to me?" She was combing her hair. As I'd noticed before, she didn't look in the mirror. I suppose I assumed all beautiful women regarded themselves, primed themselves for a night out. But then, what did I know of women such as this second-chance Noreen? She patted my cheek and gave me a look that rolled the tops of my socks.

Of course at dinner, like before, there were those who ogled, wondering just what sort of relationship we had. Her laughing at

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my shopworn attempts at humor and me grinning like Tom Sawyer must have when he tricked others into painting that fence for him. They were envious, I convinced myself. Here I was, not particularly handsome nor commanding, yet I was the one who'd struck it rich in Las Vegas. The Wheel of Fortune had spun in my favor.

The next day in my office, as I sat and admired my Hank Aaron prize, marveling at how that transaction had brought me such luck, my private line rang.

"Bishop George," I said upon hearing his voice. "How may I help you today?" I listened. He was concerned about my being with Noreen. Her age wasn't the issue. I knew that despite the public image he cultivated for business reasons, he still practiced plural marriage. I knew too that his third wife was seventeen. Mine and Noreen's age difference wasn't the issue. This call was of a more temporal nature.

"Oh, no, she has not made such an inquiry." I listened some more. Bishop Abel George rarely raised his voice, but he was persistent in his manner. "Yes, I understand she's just a cocktail waitress. What? Why would I do that, Bishop George? I've certainly not been very strong in our ward for some time, as you are well aware. But her being a gentile is of no consequence." He talked, then I said, "It's enough that we make each other happy."

I wasn't a child. I knew that answer wouldn't satisfy him. Indeed, I was quite aware of where his probing was going. Oh, I didn't know the exact details, but I knew that he would extract what he evaluated as his due from me. Hadn't he always?

That Mormon creep was scary. Good thing he just saw me as a stupid gold digger. He doesn't know I've done *Guys and Dolls* at the Rio, and was Big Nurse in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* in summer stock. I know how to play my part. He couldn't rattle me, even coupled with his two bodyguards looking all fish-eyed at me.

Him asking all polite and slithery with his quiet voice and the way he leans in when he's sitting with his fancy cane and all. Eldon showed some backbone, though, talked up for me, for us, really. That must be kinda new 'cause that bastard gave him a stare, that's for sure. Getting it regularly makes a man strong.

Eldon was so ready for the picking, I knew my plan was going to work.

I straddled him one more time and made all the right sounds. Sorry Eldon, but you're just a means to an end. You and that clown who actually believed I was going to kick back a percentage to him like his other girls had 'cause this was his idea and he'd set the con up. Nothing worse than a bullshitter who started to believe his own BS.

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"Are you familiar with the Mormon Cricket?"

If I could talk without spitting blood, I still wouldn't have answered. When the bishop arrived, Hat Boy figured to rack up extra points with his boss, and slugged me when I tried to rise from the corner.

"The Mormon Cricket," he continued, "is not in fact a cricket, but a katydid."

The bishop glanced down at his ostrich-skin boots, then back at my battered face. He sat near me, imperial-like in a folding chair, his large hand gripping his dark wood cane topped with a silver bird of some sort. "They are a large insect, though incapable of flight. They live in and on sagebrush and alfalfa, and I've seen them decimate fields of fragrant Black-eyed Susans and Morningstars. These abominations will even eat their own." He got a misty look in his pale eyes, then refocused on me.

"The first settlement's wheat was saved by gulls eating those damned insects," Bishop George said, glaring down at me like Odin used to mad dog Thor in those worn-out Jack Kirby comics I had. My only inheritance from a long-gone mother. Back when I was in one of the several foster homes I'd supposedly been raised in.

"Do you not see the significance of that? Here you had birds, seagulls, that came from the ocean, from California, to save us in the desert in Utah." He pointed his gull-headed cane at me.

I couldn't muster a response. What did he expect me to do, convert?

"The spirit of Joseph Smith was with us then, as it is now.

"Your Jezebel took money from Eldon Dudley and then disappeared. This was some two hundred thousand in cash reserves he kept tucked away for necessities."

"I don't know what you're talking about." Yeah, that was pretty lame, but I wasn't inclined to give him the satisfaction that I was beaten. Not only had he caught me, but the chick I'd set up as the dentist's Noreen had skipped out on me as well. How sad was that?

Given his exertions at tanning my hide, Hat Boy was wiping his face with a handkerchief. He then gulped down some bottled water Leaning Man had passed to him. Bishop George, a tall sumbitch with a mug like a knot of wood and an Abe Lincoln jaw, smiled. That was gruesome. "You make money by setting up lonely, well-to-do men with women who purport to be their lost loves."

Mostly he was correct. I did background research on the marks like you do in any long con. But I didn't coach the women to be the dead wife or high-school sweetheart, endlessly drilling them with

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facts and dates. That kind of pretend the chump would see through in no time. The art of my approach was for the woman to remind the sucker of the dead wife or the girlfriend. There were other guys hyped on actresses from their teenaged days. Hell, there was even one mark, a software geekonaire, who had this crush on his junior-high teacher. So I had Steiner remodel Helen just enough to suggest her features and he was hooked. We took him for more than three hundred Gs in stock options he signed over to her to save her supposedly ailing son. This setup included a child actor we hired to wheeze and sweat in a hospital bed. His stage mother desperate to get the kid a credit. People.

See I got the idea for the con watching this Hitchcock flick *Vertigo* on TV one night in a motel room in El Monte, laying low from a grift gone south. In the movie, Jimmy Stewart has it bad for Kim Novak, who reminds him of this other woman he couldn't save because of his fear of heights. Only of course it turns out Jimmy's being played. Kim is both women, the dead bit faked to draw him into a psychological trap of sexual obsession. And thus I created the Kim Novak Effect.

I figured the big dog here must have invested money in Dudley's clinics. I knew from my due diligence the dentist was a lapsed Mormon. "How'd you get to me if my girl lit out?"

Bishop George was smoking a cigarette in one of those old-fashioned cigarette holders. On him, it wasn't gay, just eerie. "Searching for the woman's trail, I worked backwards." He blew a stream of smoke into the still air. "The bartender at the Blue Velvet told me, for a hundred dollars, you'd gotten her hired there. Said he owed you a favor over some sort of misunderstanding. One I'm sure you engineered so as to have him in your pocket when you needed him." He tapped ash. "That put me on to you and," he spread his arms wide, "here you are."

"So what do you want?"

"I'm your new partner, partner. And you will pay back the money, with interest."

Shit. "That right?"

The bishop stood, poking my leg with the end of his cane. "Yes, that is so. You will continue to do what you do, the research and selection of the woman." He showed his blunt teeth. "I have no insight into the type of devious female you seem to be able to ferret out for this work. But I do have ideas on certain businessmen and politicians that we will go after."

"Wonderful."

"Get him cleaned up," Bishop George said to his muscle. Hat Boy made to snatch me off the floor but stumbled and then went to one knee, heaving.

"The hell," he said, and keeled over like a felled rhino.

Bishop George stared at this and Leaning Man said, "Let's go,"

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to me. There was a gun in his hand.

"What's going on here?" the bishop sputtered, gaping at his goon. He squinted, pushing his homely face toward the hood. He started to laugh. "Very good. Very clever," he said.

We left the bishop in the unfinished room, methodically tapping his cane. Out in the dusk Leaning Man helped me into the late-model Mustang they brought me in, and we rode away from those unfinished two stories in a development where the bishop was one of several investors. At a motel on 93, near the Arizona border, Helen was waiting for us as we entered a room. She was still hosting her Jerri Rocklyn look. "Guess we've worn out our welcome in Vegas," she cracked, noting my condition.

Leaning Man had already removed the bulky coat and now his shirt, revealing the wrap and sports bra Shauna Cheung wore to hide her breasts. She scrubbed off her fake beard and the glue she'd used on her eyelids to make them temporarily rounder and less of her natural epicanthal fold.

I sat on the edge of the bed. "How'd you two work this?"

"The bishop was asking around about you once he got your name from Burt," Helen said. Burt was the bartender at the Blue Velvet. "This I learned from a girlfriend who works the VIP lounge at Caesars."

I looked at Cheung, who had stripped down to her underwear. I supposed that whatever she gave Hat Boy in the bottled water to knock him out, she'd done to the hood she'd impersonated. She'd worn some padding to give her quite obvious female physique more of a manly shape. Pointing at her I said, "You two already knew each other."

"Yep," Cheung answered. "We figured you and the doc needed watching."

That was horseshit. Neither of them gave a damn about me or that cokehead. They'd been setting me or Steiner up for something, only the bishop's intervention presented another opportunity. Plus, they let me take a beating to make me grateful when they got me out of it. They wanted me for something.

"We better get down the road." Helen was up and moving.

I could have split—or tried to, since I was sure Shauna didn't just wave around that pistol for show. I should have gone on and left these two scheming honeys to work their juju on some other sucker. But I was the dude who came up with this and damned if I was going to turn over my most lucrative swindle to them for nothing.

Turns out Helen had been scamming the Leaning Man, the real one, for a while. He was too young to know about Jerri Rocklyn, but was mesmerized by that rack she sported. That's why she'd tried to beg off getting re-cut. She'd recently learned from him that the bishop had a network of non-Mormon business and

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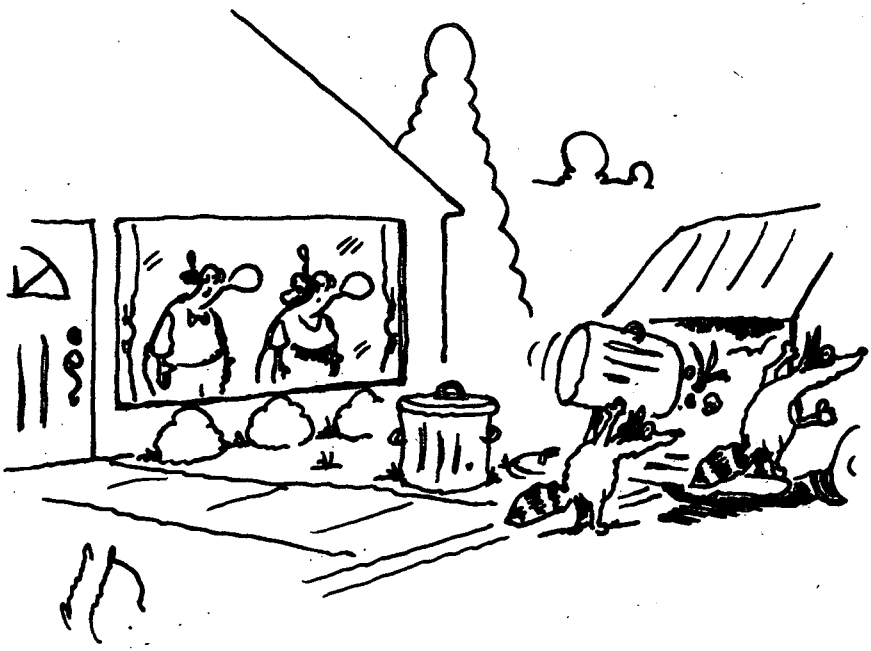
elected-official types he hobnobbed with, and not just in Nevada.

Relocated to swell Laguna Beach, California, Steiner modeled me to look just enough like the long-disappeared surfer son of a widow whose Frank Gehry-designed glass-and-stone pad overlooks the Pacific. I clip her toenails, make sure she takes the right meds at the right time, and give her back rubs with lotion that, well, let's just say often leads to other duties, if you follow my meaning. Ugh.

I couldn't run now anyway. My real name and face was on some kind of Homeland Security watch list thanks to the bishop. According to this bent-lawyer acquaintance of mine, this also put getting to my funds in the off-shore accounts iffy—at least for now, until I figured that out.

Hey, I know, the situation's somewhat reversed, but I'm also lining up some of the widow's male friends for the women to do their thing. So as I sat here on the deck of the old girl's house, as she napped from our rub-down session, I sipped a merlot and watched the sky turn orange. On the sound system Celine was singing about the Last Plane Out. And I dreamed of being on one some day, no longer trapped by the Kim Novak Effect. ●



"Apparently, they went legit."

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BLOG BYTES

by Bill Crider

Patti Abbott gets the credit for coming up with one of the more interesting recent projects in the mystery blogosphere. She asked bloggers to post (on Fridays) their recommendations of "forgotten books," novels in any field that the bloggers remember fondly but that are in danger of disappearing down the memory hole. She's had a fine response, with more than twenty bloggers contributing on the most recent Friday. Recommended books have included Neil Albert's *The January Corpse*, Ian MacDonald's *Sacrifice of Fools*, Anne Rowe's *Too Much Poison*, Jack Ehrlich's *Revenge*, and Luke Reinhart's *The Dice Man*. That's just a small sampling, since the project has been going on for several weeks now. You can check Patti's blog **(http://pattinase.blogspot.com)** every Friday for links to the reviews on the participating blogs, and you might want to search for her previous posts with the earlier links. You're almost certain to run across some gems to add to your reading list every week. I know I do.

Rex Parker, who claims to be "the 55th greatest crossword puzzle solver in the universe," has a blog **(http://salmongutter.blogspot.com)** devoted to his collection of vintage paperbacks (mostly mysteries). Every couple of days, Parker pulls a book from his shelves at random, presents scans of the front and back covers, and talks about whatever amuses or interests him about those covers. He's even willing to sell the books. I recommend his blog for both the cover scans and the entertaining commentary.

And while we're talking about covers, I should mention a site called *Judge a Book by Its Cover* **(http://judgeabook.blogspot.com)**. The blogger says, "I work in a public library. I see literally thousands of books every week: the good, the bad, and the truly hideous. These are the covers from the latter category." Covers come from all genres, and you're even invited to send in your own examples.

This leads me to recommend Bruce Black's *Book Scans* **(http://www.bookscans.com)**. The purpose of this site is to "provide a visual catalog of ALL vintage American paperbacks." A worthy project, indeed, and you can find covers of all kinds, from the sublime to the ridiculous. And not just front covers. "Significant" back covers are also included. If you like paperback books, you can spend hours browsing this site, and not a minute will be wasted. ●

Bill Crider's own peculiar blog, Bill Crider's Pop Culture Magazine, can be found at http://billcrider.blogspot.com.

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Too Wise

by O'Neil De Noux

Friday, February 14, 1947

It was a kiss with promise behind it, as much promise as a good girl would give, enough to make my heart race as we stood under the yellow bulb on her front gallery, Annette's lips pressed against mine for long, scintillating seconds before she pulled away. Her blue eyes seemed to shine as she smiled, disentangled herself from my arms, and went inside. I glanced at my watch and she'd made it in by midnight, two minutes to spare.

I took in a deep breath of cool February air, shoved my hands into the pockets of my brown suit coat, and backed down the steps to the sidewalk, which we call banquettes here in New Orleans. I watched lights go on in the narrow shotgun house where Annette Bayly lived with her parents. Turning to my left, I headed home. The faint echo of the band at the Knights of Columbus Hall traveled across Washington Square and I looked through the wrought-iron fence toward the hall where I'd met Annette four hours ago at the Valentine's Dance.

She'd come with a friend, Annette in a dark blue sweater, tight black skirt, strawberry-blond hair hanging in long curls past her shoulders. I spotted her immediately, but waited to ask her to dance. When she finished dancing with a stiff who danced like an awkward ostrich, I eased up and asked for the next dance. It was a slow one and she felt so nice in my arms. Except for a pushy blond guy with a familiar face I couldn't place, who cut in three times, we danced every dance.

While Annette politely put up with the pushy guy, I got us Cokes and ran into an old buddy. I hadn't seen Len Connelly, starting

Lucien Caye is one of the most appealing historical P.I.s we've come across. In cases set in the late 1940s, in New Orleans, the WWII vet displays a sensitivity to the beautiful women he tries (and sometimes fails) to protect. He's a former cop, like his creator, author and New Orleans native O'Neil De Noux. Readers interested in seeing more of Caye should try the collection *New Orleans Confidential* (Point Blank Press). †

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guard on our city champion Holy Cross Tigers football team, since before the war. He looked flushed, out of shape in a rumpled pre-war gray suit. He still stood a good two inches taller than my six feet, but had put on weight, well over two-fifty now. He had called me by my high-school nickname, "Rocket," before hurrying off to dance with a chesty brunette.

I crossed Frenchmen Street, heading for my new digs in the lower French Quarter. A couple of cars eased along Dauphine but I was the only pedestrian, which suited me fine. I lifted my belt, felt the reassuring weight of my .38 Smith and Wesson, tucked neatly in its leather holster at the small of my back.

"What's this?" Annette had asked when she'd felt it.

I told her I was a private detective and she laughed. It took a few seconds for her to realize I was serious. "That's good, actually. Better than you carrying a gun because you were a hood."

She told me she was five-nine, stood over five-ten in those heels, her slim body pressed against mine. She wasn't top-heavy but I felt them up against me and she filled out her sweater very neatly. Annette said she was twenty-one and I guess the word "vivacious" described her, full of personality beyond her good looks. I remember my twenty-first year, heading to the police academy, then riding in a prowl car in that sweet NOPD uniform. That was all before Pearl Harbor, before I joined the Rangers and saw the world, North Africa, Sicily, then Italy, where a German sniper put an end to my military career.

A long, sad moan from a ship's horn echoed from the river, six blocks away. At Esplanade Avenue, I spotted two scummy-looking guys standing beneath one of the oaks on the neutral ground—a median in any other city. They eyeballed me but didn't make a move as I eyeballed them back. Maybe I still walked like a cop. I crossed into the Quarter, which was getting worse all the time. When I was a kid, few of the buildings were crumbling. Since the war, the lower Quarter was filled with day workers, Bourbon Street regulars, mobbed-up dock workers, and guys like me—someone who needed inexpensive digs to start up a small-scale business.

No sense wasting time. I'd call Annette later today, ask her out. Why waste a Saturday night? Why be coy? We liked each other, and Annette wasn't the kind of girl who played games. She looked me right in the eye, didn't play flirty games or hard to get.

At Barracks Street I hung a right and dug the keys out of my pocket. My building's double door faced Barracks and Cabrini Playground across the narrow street. I went in, making sure the door locked behind me, then opened my office door, flipped on the lights, and just glanced inside. I'd been in business two weeks exactly, working on my first job—an insurance-fraud case.

The hardwood floor still looked polished and my beat-up mahogany desk looked better in dim light. I locked the door and

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went upstairs to my apartment, directly above the office at 909 Barracks Street. Inside, I crossed to the French doors, which opened to the balcony wrapping around the building's corner, and let in some brisk air before going to bed. I needed an early start in the morning.

I tried not to think of Annette's sleek legs and the faint outline of her brassiere against her sweater, tried not to think of those full lips and the lines of her pretty face, the sweet smell of her hair as we danced, cheek to cheek. I thought instead of those bright eyes and the way she talked with me, without a hint of pretension, without the typical man-woman banter, no beating around the bush. Annette was as bright as she was pretty and I liked that in a woman.

Like the way she explained her nickname—Too Wise. You see, her last name had two *y*s and not a single *i* or *e,* as in the standard spelling of "Bailey." Calling her Two-Ys had changed to "Too Wise" in school, as she was always a wise guy in class, too wise for her age, claimed the nuns. Hell, when I played wise guy in grammar school, the nuns took a ruler to my knuckles.

"Bayly's Scottish," she said.

I quipped, "And I thought you were Irish."

She put her hands behind her back and leaned forward, jaw jutting. "And what are you, Mr. Lucien Caye?"

"Half French, half Spanish. A real half-breed."

I felt a stirring in my loins as I rolled over in bed and switched to thinking about Len Connelly, replaying the city championship game against Jesuit. I remembered that the rain came just as the second half started, the score tied 7-7. I'd scored our touchdown on a five-yard scamper around the right side, Len leading the way, bowling over the outside linebacker. I darted into the end zone.

It had seemed that every time we got the ball, the rain increased. When the Blue Jays got it, it seemed to slacken, enough for Jesuit to boot a twenty-yard field goal as the third quarter ended. It got real sloppy then. Both quarterbacks fumbled snaps from center, receivers dropped passes, punts were shanked. Len's knee was killing him. With a minute remaining, we were backed up on our twenty-yard line, rain pelting our helmets so hard we could barely hear the play calls in the huddle. The Blue Jays were bouncing in place, anticipating the championship. Our quarterback called two plays. A slant off right guard, Len's position. Then a fake off left tackle and a long pass.

We never got to the second play. I took the handoff deeper than usual and hit the crease, accelerating in the mud. Len trapped two linebackers with one block and I cut back, sending another linebacker sliding into the safety and the field was open in front of me. I hit the afterburners and used my 100-yard dash track speed all the way to the end zone, two Blue Jays right on my tail but never able to catch me.

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I didn't hear the crowd noise until I turned around and suddenly the rain hammering my helmet faded with the roar of the Holy Cross fans, but drenched and standing, all screaming. Holy Cross Tigers 14, Jesuit Blue Jays 10. Len Connelly lay flat on his back at our twenty-five yard line. He needed two operations to be able to graduate without crutches.

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 15, 1947

I left before six A.M., wanting to set up on my prey before anyone got up in his neighborhood. Herb Moity was forty-two, stood five-five, weighed close to three hundred pounds. Balding and unmarried, Moity lived on the left side of a shotgun double on Port Street, Bywater. His parents lived on the other side. He'd slipped and fallen at work and was permanently disabled. Oxford Insurance Company had a problem with Mr. Moity. This was the third time he'd been "permanently disabled," hitting up Farmers Insurance and Delta Insurance along the way. The man brought home an easy twelve thousand a year in settlement money, with more to come from Oxford.

I had two problems. The first I'd solved when I found an alley between an abandoned house and Nick's Barroom to be able to sit in my prewar 1940 DeSoto Coach, ready to photograph Moity if he did anything physical around the house, ready to follow him if he left in his baby-blue 1947 Chrysler four-door sedan. Being gray, my DeSoto was good for surveillances. The second problem—Herb Moity was a fat, lazy slob, not likely to do anything physical.

I took Burgundy over to Esplanade then took a left on Dauphine on my way to Bywater so as to pass by Annette's, slowing as I crossed Frenchmen Street. It was getting light out and the streetlights still lit up the area well. I spotted someone with a flashlight in Washington Square, turned to look at Annette's house, and realized the front door was wide open. I slowed, then looked back at the square again, spotting a man in a suit with flashlight in hand, a man with a cigarette dangling from his mouth. I pulled over, parked, and took a couple of deep breaths.

Whatever brought Lt. Frenchy Capdeville to Washington Square that early had to be bad. I got out and went through the gate at the Elysian Fields side of the park and approached Frenchy as he stood on the concrete walkway next to some thick bushes. Two uniformed coppers beyond Frenchy noticed me, one calling out, "You can't come in here."

Frenchy looked up, saw me, and said, "It's okay." If he wore a cape and mask, Frenchy could pass for Zorro, with his black curly hair and pencil-thin moustache. He wore an old dark-brown suit, cigarette glowing in his mouth.

I looked back at Annette's open door, seeing a light on somewhere inside, feeling my heart pounding. I stepped up and asked Frenchy,

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"What happened?"

"Girl got murdered last night."

My knees felt week. No. It couldn't be.

"When?"

"Around one A.M. We came back to search the area in daylight. She lived across the street."

I stepped over to one of the black wrought-iron benches to sit. I took in another breath and asked, "Her name? It wasn't Annette, was it?"

"Annette Bayly," Frenchy said, the words hitting me like a land mine. I couldn't move.

"What?" I heard Frenchy say as he moved closer. "You knew her?"

I couldn't see anything; it was as if I'd fallen into a black pit. I put my head down between my knees and tried to breathe. It couldn't be her. Couldn't be. But . . . if I'd learned anything as a cop, it was that death was always possible.

Frenchy's black shoes moved into my line of vision. They needed a shine.

"You knew her?" he asked again.

I sat up and leaned back. "Met her last night at the K of C dance." I pointed across the park. "Walked her home just before midnight." I looked up at Frenchy. "She have strawberry-blond hair?"

He nodded. "Wore a blue sweater, black skirt."

"What the hell happened?"

"Her paw says she was all excited when she got home, talking up a storm, realized she'd left her purse at the dance, and went to get it just before one. They found her when she didn't come right back."

Two other detectives stepped up, Collins and Francona. I watched them search around the bushes. I could see now, in the morning light, that branches were broken on the bushes.

"Three buttons were missing from her skirt," Frenchy said for my benefit. I remembered that Annette's skirt had buttons down the front. "We found one up here on the walkway." Frenchy flipped off his flashlight. "See the dirt under the bushes? Red clay. Musta been put in by the parks department 'cause it ain't native to New Orleans, that's for sure."

I watched Francona collect some of the dirt into an envelope. Frenchy fired up a fresh cigarette just as a scream echoed from across the street. A girl I recognized as Annette's friend stood out on her gallery with her hand raised, finger pointing right at me. "That's him! That's him!" she screeched. "That's the one took her home last night!" She crossed the street to the fence. "He's the one smooching with her!"

A large man came out on the gallery, followed by a small woman with strawberry-blond hair. The man hurried across Dauphine to the fence. Frenchy went over and talked with him. The big man, whom I took for Annette's father, shouted, "He was probably waiting outside for her!"

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I got up and eased toward them, watched Frenchy flip away his cigarette and take out his notepad. He asked, "What about this other guy you mentioned?"

The girl stared at me with such anger in her eyes. "The masher?" she said. "He was pushy, but him . . ." She pointed at me again. "He's the one took her home."

Frenchy glanced back at me for a second before reading from his notebook. "This masher, you said he was about six feet, blond hair, small moustache, little white scar on his chin, right?"

"Yes." She still glared at me.

"He wore tan linen slacks with cuffs, white shirt, brown jacket, and had a gold Bulova watch?"

"Yes."

French nodded back to me. "This the guy you said wore the brown suit?"

She described my clothes to a tee, the brown suit, white shirt, beige tie with geometric designs, down to my brown-and-white Florsheim shoes.

Annette's father reached a fist through the fence and snarled, "The killer always comes back to the scene of the crime!" The man read too many detective novels.

Frenchy fired up another cigarette, gave me the same look my old man used to give me when I'd disappointed him, and said, "You need to come with us."

I nodded, lifted my coat, and turned my .38 toward him. "You better take this."

"He's a cop!" said Annette's father.

"Private investigator," Frenchy said as he took my .38 and slipped it into his coat pocket. Francona tapped my shoulder and I went with him, across the park to Royal Street where their prowl cars were parked, directly across from the K of C Hall. As Francona unlocked one of the cars, I spotted Len Connelly standing beneath the awning of the hall. He lifted a hand and hesitantly waved to me.

"Who's that?" Francona asked.

"Guy I know. You need to talk with him. He was at the dance too."

I'd been in the tiny interrogation rooms in the Detective Bureau before, but for only brief intervals. I'd never been left inside one to fester for hours until that morning. Never realized it smelled that bad, reeking of stale cigarette smoke, body odor, and ammonia, probably from urine. It looked clean, however. There was no window, only four blank walls painted light green, a small gray metal desk, and two hardback chairs.

Right after they put me inside, Frenchy came in with a consent search form for me to sign. "Better get two," I said. "My car's parked next to Washington Square." I pulled out my keys for him. He knew my apartment and office. I wanted him to search it, search for the

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missing buttons, for branches broken from the bushes, for that odd red clay.

"Suit I wore last night is in the closet," I told Frenchy as I signed the consent search forms. "Lighter of the two brown ones. Tie's in there, too, shoes on the floor. Only brown-and-whites I have. Shirt, undershirt, and jockeys are in the dirty-clothes hamper."

Passing him the forms and the keys, I asked, "You're not going to let Hays in there, are you?"

I'd spotted Jimmy Hays in the squad room. A squat man with stubby arms, hair cut like Moe Howard, Hays worked with me at the third precinct before the war. He'd shot a dog that had knocked over the garbage can outside the precinct house one night. I knocked him out with one punch to his glass jaw. He never liked me much after that.

"I'm taking Francona."

"Thanks."

I tried leaning one of the chairs against the wall, closed my eyes, trying to think of a beach or the Rocky Mountains, anything to escape, but I kept seeing Annette's face smiling at me after we'd kissed. The coffee I drank that morning churned in my belly and tried to work its way back up my esophagus. It didn't occur to me to worry that I was a suspect, not really. The fact that I'd never see Annette again was enough to fill my heart with a sharp pain, fill my brain with images from the dance. Obviously, the "masher" was the pushy guy who'd cut in. I still couldn't place his face, but I'd seen it before. I started thinking like a detective, wondering who could have done this, instead of focusing on the loss of such beauty.

I'd just glanced at my watch again, seeing it was almost ten-thirty, when Frenchy came in and placed my gun on the tiny desk. "I had to go through the motions. You have an alibi witness, to boot."

"I do?"

"Sergeant V. M. Clortho."

"Clortho? He can't stand me." Another one of my fans, Clortho was the laziest cop I'd ever worked with. I told him that once at roll call, which got the whole platoon roaring as I gave Clortho his nickname—Slowdown. Like Hays, he never forgave me.

Frenchy lit up another cigarette and sat across from me. "Slowdown was outside your building just now, shooting off his mouth about you. He was on the beat last night. Saw you kiss the girl and walk home. He tagged behind you in his prowl car, said you were all moonstruck. Waited for you to fall off the curb, but you weren't drunk enough. Saw you go in your building. He parked next to Cabrini Playground and caught up on his reports. I asked how long he was there. He said a good hour, hour and a half, and you didn't come back out. That's an alibi witness, best when it's someone who don't like you."

I picked up my keys, tucked the .38 back in its holster, and stood up. "So what now?"

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Frenchy said they were going back to the K of C Hall, see if they could locate this "masher" and anyone else who was there, see if any neighbors saw anything in the park last night.

"You." He tapped my chest with an index finger. "Don't go anywhere near there. We already drove your car home."

I spotted Francona in the squad room and asked him what Len Connelly had said.

"Said he saw you leave with the girl. I asked about the 'masher' and he saw the guy leave too, about the same time and none of y'all came back inside."

Frenchy gave me a wary look. "Don't go back around there. Let us handle this."

I told him okay, but we both knew better.

I thought about trying my luck with the wonderful Mr. Herb Moity that afternoon, anything to get my mind off the fact that Annette was lying in the parish morgue. But the rain came in just as I was about to leave, and if I didn't know better, it looked like a hurricane. The huge branches of the live oaks in Cabrini Playground bounced in the wind as rain hammered my building. The thick black branches of the magnolias seemed to bend precariously in the storm.

I watched through my office windows, spotting a man running along the banquette and stopping outside my building then ringing my office doorbell. I hit the buzzer and went to see who I'd let in. Len Connelly pulled the coat off his soaked head and smiled weakly at me. "You got something to drink, Rocket?"

I'd picked up a coat rack at a used-furniture store and draped the soaking coat over it as Len went and plopped in one the chairs in front of my beat-up mahogany desk. I went over to the kitchen area, calling back, "Scotch, Bourbon, or Irish?"

Len opted for Bourbon, neat. I reached into the small refrigerator for a beer, not wanting to get loaded. My office was once an upholstery shop, so most of the interior walls had been removed, leaving the kitchen and bathroom and enough room to play a little touch football without knocking anything over.

I put the bottle of Bourbon and a glass in front of Len and went around to sit in the captain's chair, Len wiping his face with a handkerchief, saying, "Got your number from the operator. You're not in the book."

Not yet. I took a hit of beer as he poured himself a triple.

"Falstaff? They use Mississippi River water with that, don't they?"

"No," I said. "Been to the brewery. They truck in spring water from Abita Springs." When I was a rookie there was a burglary at the Falstaff brewery on South Broad. Everyone figured it had to be cops, police headquarters being right across the street, only Jefferson Parish deputies caught the perpetrators when their getaway truck broke down on Airline Highway. College students on their way back

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to LSU. It was a fraternity prank. Morons. Being charged with Revised Statute 14:62, Simple Burglary, wasn't a prank.

Len took a hit of bourbon, let it settle a moment before he focused his dark eyes on me and said, "Why'd you sic the cops on me?" His voice wasn't friendly.

"You were at the dance."

He nodded, looked at the row of windows facing Barracks Street. "Yeah. I just don't like coppers."

"I used to be one. You've had cop trouble?"

"Naw. I never liked bullies, and the dicks, they're just bullies with badges. Like to slap people around."

I couldn't imagine anyone trying to slap Len Connelly around. He took another drink, this one not as heavy, pointed his chin at me, and asked, "Why'd they pick you up?"

"I was one of the last people to see her alive."

Len leaned back and looked up at the ceiling. "Man oh man: She was pretty. I watched y'all dancing and damn, what a tragedy."

It came flooding back, I could almost feel Annette in my arms again. Funny how that worked. I took another hit of icy beer.

"There was a guy there, blond hair, little moustache, about your size. Real pushy with the girls. You see him?"

"Yeah. He cut in a couple times. Annette's friend called him a masher."

"Man, he looked familiar." Len focused his eyes on mine. "And he left the same time as y'all and didn't come back."

"The cops will track him down."

He gave me a pained look. "You're a detective. Find him."

Thunder rolled in over the Quarter, sounding like distant cannon. A bright streak of lightning lit up the dark sky.

"How's the knee?" I asked.

"Goes out now and again." Len refilled his glass. "Kept me out of the army."

Guess he could see that bothered me.

"Hey, I did my duty. Worked for Higgins building landing craft."

Higgins Boat Yard, right over there on the Industrial Canal, built the boats that took the troops ashore at Normandy, Saipan, Iwo Jima, brought me ashore with my fellow rangers in Algeria, Sicily, and Anzio.

"Saw in the paper how you came back a hero and all," Len said between hits of Bourbon. "Almost lost an arm, as I recall. Cassino, right?"

I nodded.

"They don't give medals like you got unless you earn them. If I was you, I'd have 'em up on the wall."

My Silver Star and Purple Heart were tucked away in a drawer upstairs, next to my police marksman pin and MVP plaque from Holy Cross.

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"Maybe I could help you track down this masher."

Talk about bad ideas. Then I remembered Frenchy's warning and said, "Okay, why don't you snoop around the K of C and I'll try to figure why the guy looked so familiar."

Len raised his glass just as a bolt of lightning lit up the sky and thunder hit the building like a concussion.

"Damn," said Len.

"Exactly." I drained the beer and went for another.

SUNDAY, FEBRUARY 16, 1947

Herb Moity was even too lazy to go to the Mardi Gras parades. Setting up early, I watched his neighbors pack up their kids and ladders and head for the parade routes. I spotted Moity once around two P.M., when he peeked out his front door. He was shirtless. When it got dark, I drove home, avoiding Washington Square completely.

On the radio that evening, they replayed the Mercury Theater production of H.G. Wells's *The War of the Worlds* and I turned off all the lights, sat back in my easy chair facing the French doors and my balcony overlooking the playground, and let Orson Welles and company take me away from everything for a while.

I'd never heard the broadcast before, didn't even know it had caused a panic across the country back in 'thirty-eight. It hadn't panicked many people in New Orleans. I remember hearing about it after, people saying, "Hell, if the Martians wanted New Jersey, they could have it."

The deep voice of Orson Welles echoed, "We know now that in the early years of the twentieth century this world was being watched closely by intelligences greater than man's, and yet as mortal as his own . . ."

I closed my eyes and remembered reading that same opening in the book when I was a kid. Can't improve on good writing.

". . . across an immense ethereal gulf, minds that are to our minds as ours are to the beasts in the jungle, intellects vast, cool, and unsympathetic, regarded this earth with envious eyes and slowly and surely drew their plans against us . . ."

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 17, 1947

A detective will take luck in any form, whenever it comes.

At 11:10 A.M, a Sears & Roebuck truck pulled up in front of Herb Moity's shotgun. Two men got out, one knocking on Moity's door, the other opening the back of the truck. I focused my Leica on the door as Moity came out to hold open the screen door for the two men, now wrestling with a huge refrigerator. I figured they'd take it around back because the kitchen in a shotgun house is always at the rear, but these geniuses decided on a frontal attack and promptly got stuck going up the front stoop.

They tried wiggling the refrigerator on the dolly, tried going back

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down the steps, tried tipping it, almost losing it, before they stopped and scratched their heads. Moity had been shouting instructions, getting red-faced in the process, then let go of the screen door and went to show them how to do it. I got a good shot of him plopping his big butt on the edge of the stoop, bouncing to the ground, a better shot as he went around to put a shoulder against the fridge as the man above pulled on the dolly and the other used his shoulder next to Moity.

They got it up two of the three steps before the man next to Moity jumped up on the porch to hold open the screen door. I got a series of pictures of Herb Moity shouldering the fridge up the final step. The growl of a dog caught my attention as I photographed Moity shoving the appliance through the front door. I looked down and a black mutt was snarling up at me.

I'd brought ham sandwiches, so I unwrapped one and dropped it for the dog, who wolfed it down. After, he sat waiting for another. I trained the Leica on the house and waited. When the dog started growling again, I gave him my last sandwich. Fifteen minutes later, the three men led a rusty fridge back out, back down the front stoop, back into the truck, ole Herb Moity helping all the time. He waved to the men as they pulled away. I waited until Moity went back inside to slip out of the alley, making sure I didn't run over the dog.

I was feeling pretty good for a few minutes, until I approached Elysian Fields and it hit me again—Annette Bayly and that smile, that Too Wise gleam in those blue eyes. The sinking feeling gripped my heart again. Okay, I'd just met her, barely knew her, but she was alive, so damn sparkling.

Just as I pulled up in front of my building, Frenchy Capdeville arrived in his prowl car. Flipping his cigarette into the street, he joined me on the banquette and said, "Got something to show you." He wore another rumpled suit, this one dark green, and had his black tie loosened, his dark hair looking disheveled.

I led the way into my office, called back over my shoulder, "Want a 'smile'?"

Frenchy called a beer a "smile." He shook his head and plopped down in the chair Len had used. Funny how most of my visitors sat in the right chair in front my desk, rather than the other. I sat in my captain's chair.

From an inside coat pocket, Frenchy pulled out his notepad and said, "Listen to this. Came in a letter today addressed to the detective in charge of the murder at Washington Square." He cleared his throat before reading, " 'The girl was a sacrifice. No need to worry until next February fifteenth.' " Frenchy looked up at me. "Signed, Brother of the Wolf. There was a return address on the envelope that read 'Cave of Lupercal.' It was postmarked New Orleans, with today's date."

"Since when you get mail the same day?"

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"Somebody at the post office must be trying to impress one of their big shots, I guess." Frenchy put his notebook away.

I shrugged. "What do you make of it?"

"I checked. Whoever wrote it's got education. Lupercalia was a Roman festival celebrated on February fifteenth, a pagan fertility festival. The Christians countered it with Valentine's Day on February fourteenth, sort of to trump them a day early."

"Lupercalia? They sacrificed girls?"

"Not according to Dr. Walker, professor over at Loyola. They sacrificed goats and dogs." French looked at his watch. "Maybe a 'smile' would be all right."

I brought us two Falstaffs and Frenchy said, "Jesus, you gotta start getting Schlitz or Budweiser. They make this stuff with river water."

I didn't correct him. I just sat there thinking about Annette as a *sacrifice.*

A detective will take luck in any form, whenever it comes.

Ten minutes after Frenchy pulled away, I went down the block to my cleaners to drop off my blue suit and felt the hair stand up on the back of my neck when the masher from the K of C dance hurried into the cleaners right in front of me. I went in behind him to make sure. The little moustache was neatly trimmed and there was a light scar on his chin. Annette's friend said he wore a gold Bulova and there it was on his left wrist.

When he plopped his bundle of clothes on the counter, I saw the tan linen slacks with cuffs, white shirt, and brown jacket he'd worn to the dance. I watched Mr. Juan, owner and operator of Praca's Cleaners, corner of Barracks and Burgundy, stuff the masher's clothes in two separate bags, attach tickets to the bags, and hand the man his receipts.

I put my blue suit up on the counter and followed the masher outside. No way I could just follow him without being spotted, and since he didn't get in a car, he lived nearby like me. What I hadn't expected was for him to wheel about and say, "What's your problem, fella?"

"Whaddya mean?"

"Ogling me like you're about to pull a stickup."

I smiled. "Weren't you at the K of C dance Friday night?"

He hesitated a half-second and said, "No. What's it to you, anyway?"

"I saw you there."

He took a step closer. He was about an inch shorter than me, but more solid, a pretty boy with his hands in fists now, set and ready for me, and I figured there was only one reason for him to lie about the dance. I slowly raised my left arm to glance at my watch and threw a right cross at his jaw, stepping into it, catching him square, sending him straight down.

I landed with both knees on his chest and he gave out a whoosh of air and whatever fight was left in him was gone with the wind.

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When I yanked him up by the front of his yellow dress shirt, a couple of buttons popped off and his receipts went into the gutter. I shoved him against the wall and waited for his eyes to clear. When they did, a minute later, they'd lost their fight.

It wasn't easy lugging him all the way down the street and into my office, plopping him in the popular right chair in front of my desk while I called Frenchy, who stammered, "You did what?"

"You wanna come get him or do I drag him to headquarters?"

I frisked my prisoner, who just sat there with drool running down his chin. Driver's license in the name of Maurice Bullock, he lived at 1212 Dauphine Street, a half-block up Dauphine from my corner building. He also had a Tulane University ID card, listing his job as assistant professor, and two hundred dollars cash.

Wait a minute—Maurice Bullock? Mo Bullock? No wonder he looked familiar. I stuffed the card and money back into his wallet and shoved it back in his pocket. I went around to my chair to take a long gander at New Orleans's Most Valuable High School Athlete of 1935, the man I'd just cold-cocked. Mo Bullock was the best baseball player to come out of Jesuit, maybe forever. He also played right halfback and strong safety for the Blue Jays my senior year. He was one of the guys I outran on my eighty-yard scamper in the rain. Last I'd heard of him he'd signed with the Detroit Tigers farm club.

"You're in big trouble," he told me as I saw Frenchy's prowl car park in front of my DeSoto. "My family's got enough money to bury you in lawsuits."

He told Frenchy the same thing, but after hearing my side of the story, the lieutenant took Mo to the detective bureau, me trailing behind in my DeSoto. I had to wait out in the squad room, sitting at one of the desks, while the dicks ignored me. The room smelled of cigarette butts and stale coffee, and the windows had a yellow tint on the inside. I sat there massaging my right hand. Should have kicked the sucker.

After about an hour, Jimmy Hays brought two men in fancy suits into the room and had them wait outside Frenchy's glass-enclosed office while he went to the interview room where Frenchy was questioning Mo. Hays gave me his meanest look, which looked so much like an angry Moe Howard, I almost laughed.

Frenchy guided Mo Bullock by the elbow out of the interview room and into his office with the two fancy-suited men, leaving Hays outside. On his way to the coffee pot, Hays shot me a evil grin. "You're in big trouble now."

"How's Larry and Curly?"

He growled.

Ten minutes later Mo and the suits left without looking my way. Frenchy waved me into his office and said, "Close the door." He fired up a fresh cigarette and I didn't know why, the room was cloudy with cigarette smoke.

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"Those were the Bullock family lawyers. Did you know your boy's father is a millionaire? Some kinda shipping magnate."

"Nope."

"Well, prepare yourself for a lawsuit."

"What about the dance? He lied about it. He was the masher."

Frenchy kicked his feet up on his gray metal desk. The soles of his shoes were almost worn through. "Said he saw you at the dance. Claimed you were all over the Annette girl. Claimed he didn't even know about the killing. Doesn't read the papers. It ain't against the law to lie to a P.I."

I sank back in the uncomfortable metal folding chair. "I've been thinking. He's a professor at Tulane, right?"

"Teaches European History."

I perked up. "Then he'd know about this Lupercalia."

Frenchy nodded. "So would anyone who could read an encyclopedia." He tapped ashes into an overflowing ashtray on his desk. "I don't think he did it. Wrong shoe size."

"Shoe size?"

Frenchy shook his head. "You know, Sherlock, we don't tell civilians everything we know. We found two good footprints in the dirt. Our killer wore a size fourteen shoe with a worn left heel. We got closeup pictures and casts of the prints."

My chin dipped slowly to my chest.

"Bullock wears a size ten. Like you," Frenchy added. "You need a good lawyer, let me know."

"I have one."

On my way home I wondered if the attorney who hired me to catch Herb Moity would represent me. There went any money I'd make on Moity. Then I remembered Praca's Cleaners and gunned the DeSoto. Why hadn't I thought of it earlier?

I found both receipts in the street.

"I wait this for you," said Mr. Juan, handing me a receipt for my blue suit.

I handed him Bullock's receipts, along with a sawbuck to look inside the bags with Bullock's clothes. Holding my breath didn't help as I searched the white shirt, brown jacket, and linen pants, even the cuffs. No branches, no red clay, no missing button from Annette's dress.

Tuesday, February 18, 1947

When I was little I loved Mardi Gras, going to the parades with my parents, dressing up in costume, yelling "throw me something, mister," catching beads. But when my parents died, well, how did St. Paul put it? Something like, "When I was a child, I spoke as a child, thought as a child: But when I became a man, I put away childish things." I think it was St. Paul who said that. I wasn't much of a Catholic anymore.

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Frenchy had called me a "civilian." Don't know why it bothered me. I guess because I thought I was a detective. The din from the parade two blocks away up on Rampart Street sounded like a distant riot as I sat out on my balcony, feet up on the wrought-iron railing. I watched a pair of mockingbirds run off a blue jay and two crows in quick succession. Smaller than the crows, the mockingbirds looked like P-51s hounding Heinkel He 111 German bombers. They must have had a nest in one of oaks in Cabrini Playground.

A ship's whistle echoed dolefully from the river to my left. I thought it had changed tune until I realized that the second tone was my doorbell. I hit the buzzer and went into the hall to look downstairs to see who I'd admitted. Len Connelly stood unsteadily at the bottom of the stairs.

"Up here," I called down. He spotted me, raised the bottle of Bourbon in his left hand to me, and started up. Needless to say, he was more than half looped and I wondered if he'd make it all the way up. He did, smiling at me and saying something profane about the crowds outside and the dumb parade.

"Can't understand the attraction," he said as he came in to drop heavily onto my sofa. Focusing bleary eyes at me, he said, "Got any ice?"

I went for a Falstaff and dropped ice cubes into a glass for him. He managed to pour himself a triple without spilling any on my coffee table. Then he raised the glass to me and said, "City champs!"

I sat in the love seat, both of us kicking our heels up, on either end of the coffee table.

"Funny you should mention that," I said. "Remember the masher at the dance, the guy who looked so familiar?"

"Yeah. Blond guy."

"Mo Bullock."

"Huh?" It took a second and his eyes lit up. "Oh, yeah. No wonder he looked familiar. How'dja remember him?"

"Ran into him. Dragged him to headquarters. He's not the killer."

Len took another belt. "You sure?"

I took a hit of beer and spotted something that made my throat tighten. I had to wait for the swallow of beer to go down.

"What size you wear?" I said, making it sound light, friendly, nodding at his shoes.

"Fourteen." He chuckled but all I could see was the worn spot on the left heel.

I tried to control my breathing as my mind put the pieces together. "Wasn't your father a professor?"

Len grinned drunkenly. "Ancient History at St. Mary's Dominican College." He didn't sound as drunk as he looked. "First Catholic women's college in the south. Taught all those girls, but it didn't help me get any." He took another long drink, raised his glass, and added, "Bet that jerk-off Mo Bullock gets lotsa women at Tulane with

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them Newcomb college coeds runnin' around in tight sweaters."

The word "sweater" almost set me off. The pieces just kept coming and my neck burned, my hands opening and closing into fists. Tulane. I never mentioned Mo was at Tulane.

"Did you find anything for me around Washington Square?" I asked in a controlled voice.

"Huh? Oh, uh, no."

I'd bet he didn't even go there. And for a long moment I saw it all playing out like a horror movie. Len following us through the park, watching us kiss, watching me walk off. Len waiting, watching the lights in her house, then seeing her come out in that sweater, come right for him, and then . . .

"You know," my voice came out deeper now, "cops don't need to know why. Don't need to prove motive at all. They just have to prove how it happened, when it happened, who was killed, and then who did the killing. Why isn't important to the police."

He gave me a shrug.

"But I'm a civilian detective and I want to know why."

Len stared back at me as if frozen in time.

"I knew her. I kissed her. We were going to be something, man." My voice quivered in anger.

"Why you yelling at me?"

"Because I want to know why you did it."

He sobered immediately and I could see the guilt in his eyes. "You're crazy, man."

"Lupercalia," I said and he wouldn't look me in the eye. "Got it from your old man, didn't you? All those years of him giving the family tidbits from history. Any prof would do that. You knew about Lupercalia and the Cave of Lupercal from your old man."

"Bullock teaches it," Len snarled.

I got up, went to the phone, and tried calling Frenchy on Mardi Gras day. It took three calls to get someone at the detective bureau to answer. Thankfully it wasn't Hays. Hanging up, I stood there waiting for Frenchy to call back.

Len stared straight ahead, as if in a trance, not looking at me as the minutes ticked by. When the phone rang, it startled both of us. I snatched it up, my eyes still staring at my old friend.

"You better get over to my place," I told Frenchy. "I'm looking at the killer right now. No, I haven't been drinking. It's Len Connelly. Yeah, my friend."

Len stood as I hung up and turned toward the door, glaring at me. "You gonna try and stop me?"

I pulled out my revolver, raised and cocked it, pointed it at his head.

"You gonna shoot me?" Len opened the door.

I hesitated, then slowly lowered the gun.

He left and I felt better, thinking like a detective now. I wanted him back at his house. When Frenchy arrived, I would talk him into

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getting a search warrant. We'd find something from the bushes, maybe some red clay, maybe even one of Annette's buttons.

When Frenchy arrived, I told him and he said, "Man, that's kinda weak."

"Not too weak for a search warrant. He's wearing shoes with a worn heel. Size fourteen."

Frenchy shook his head. "You're in luck it's Mardi Gras. I'll do about anything to get away from parade duty."

Len Connelly lived in an apartment at the rear of a crumbling Creole cottage on Burgundy Street, on the far side of Elysian Fields, not three blocks from Washington Square. I waited outside with a rookie patrolman while the detectives searched inside. It didn't take a half-hour before Frenchy came out with a handcuffed Len, his head down. They put him in a prowl car and Frenchy came over to show me a button from Annette Bayly's skirt.

"It was up on the mantel, like a damn trophy."

On my way to the detective bureau, it occurred to me that Annette's father was right after all. The killer *had* returned to the scene of the crime. I could just envision Len watching the detectives in the square.

I sat out in the squad room again. At least the hand I'd hurt punching Bullock felt better. An hour after Frenchy took Len into an interrogation room, the other detectives who'd searched Len's house came in. Hays wouldn't look at me. Francona came over to show me Len's grass-stained pants, red clay embedded around the knees. He also showed me twigs from the bushes found in the bottom of my friend's dirty-clothes hamper.

Frenchy came out awhile later carrying Len's shoes, which he passed to Francona as evidence. "Check out the left heel." He turned to me and said, "He copped out. Crying in there like a baby."

"He tell you why?"

"Made a pass at her and she slapped him. Said he was drunk and lost it."

Before I left, Frenchy asked me to write up something for him. "Put what he told you on paper for me, will ya?"

"Sure."

Wednesday, February 19, 1947

Mo Bullock's place was a bright yellow, two-story Greek Revival wooden house with three bay windows in front. A three-step stoop led up to a front gallery with four wooden posts and fancy gingerbread trim painted pale blue. I rang the doorbell and retreated to the steps so he wouldn't think I was gonna pounce on him.

He answered wearing a maroon dinner jacket over off-white pants, a brandy snifter in his left hand. His pretty-boy face sported a purple bruise on his left jaw.

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"I came to apologize. I was dead wrong." I held out one of my business cards for him. "Here. You can spell my name right on the lawsuit."

His squeezed his left eye partially shut. "You're a peculiar bastard."

"I also came to tell you they caught the killer. It was a friend of mine. Played ball with me at Holy Cross." I figured he'd read it in the paper.

His eyes widened. "Sonofabitch. I recognize you now. You're the speed demon from the championship game. I knew I knew that face."

I stepped closer so he could take the card. He did and then asked, "Want a drink?"

"Sure."

He opened the door wide and I stepped into a small foyer, following him into a formal living room with thick Persian carpets, walls filled with books, and copies of Impressionist paintings. Hell, maybe they weren't all copies.

"What's your poison?" Mo headed for a wet bar at the back of the room.

"Beer."

He brought me an imported brew, something called Stella Artois. It was icy cold, with a light taste. We sat across from one another in thick recliners. Mo gently touched the bruise on his chin and said, "You were always fast, but I didn't think you were that fast."

"It was a sucker punch."

"Well, it worked. Never been decked like that."

I took another hit of Stella Artois and he started talking about the game. I didn't remember him scoring Jesuit's only touchdown. I didn't play both ways like he did. My coach kept me fresh that way.

"Man, I'll never forget that run," he said. "I was right on your butt, only you kept accelerating and I couldn't close."

"My friend Len Connelly was the one who bowled over two of your linebackers with one block. He sprung me."

"And he's the reason we're here right now."

I nodded, then asked, "I thought you went with the Detroit Tigers."

His turn to nod. "I made it to the big show for one season. Then the damn Japs hit Pearl Harbor and I went into the Corps." He took a drink from the snifter. "Shoulda died on Iwo Jima but they saved me, only I was shot in the back and never made it to the show again."

He'd framed his Navy Cross and had it on a wall between paintings.

"You in the war?" he asked.

I didn't mind talking about my Silver Star, since his Navy Cross trumped me.

"Cassino, huh? Couldn't have been as bad as Iwo Jima," he said, "but I heard it was bad enough. How'd they catch your friend?"

I told him about the footprints and the other evidence.

"...u're the one who figured it, right?"

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"Yeah, just like I figured you."

"Batting five hundred ain't bad."

"Maybe in baseball. Not when it comes to murder," I said, finishing off the beer. I thanked him and said I didn't want to overstay my welcome.

Mo took my business card out of his pocket and said, "Caye. French, isn't it?"

I nodded and he slipped the card back into this pocket. "I'm not suing you. But you owe me one. I might need a private investigator someday." He stood up. "And it takes a big man to admit a mistake and face up to it."

"Helluva mistake."

We shook hands and I headed back home. It was getting dark already and for a moment I thought about how it was different all over again. It was so different before the war, different again when I got out of the army, different after V-J Day, different after kissing Annette.

I drifted back to that night, seeing her for the first time, waiting to dance with her, how she felt pressed against me, the clean scent of her hair. I'd never forget those eyes. And as I walked, I let myself feel the loss all over again, let my heart stammer and ache. I wanted to feel something other than the rage to strangle my old friend to death.

Her name was Annette Bayly, of Scottish descent, nicknamed Too Wise for the two *y*s in her name.

It was a kiss with promise behind it.

If only.

Life was full of "if onlys." ●

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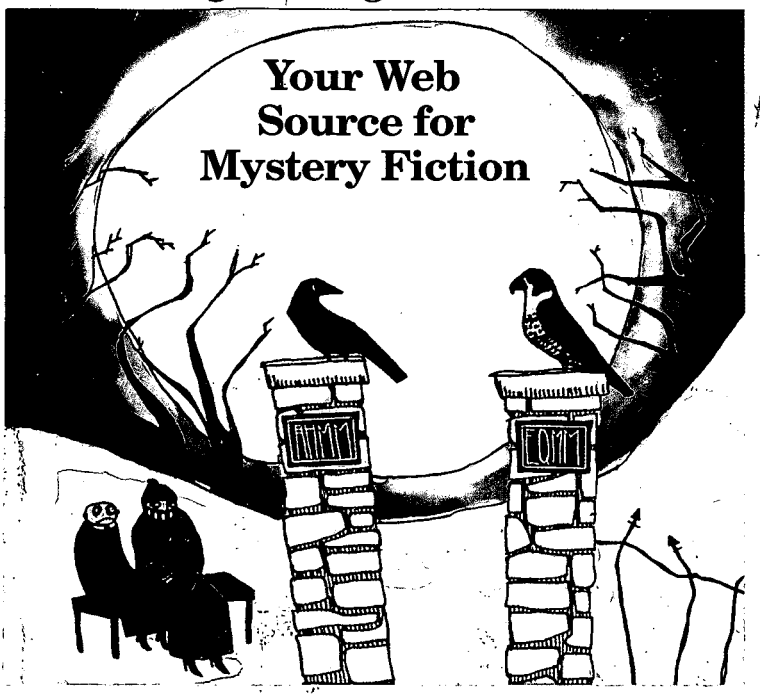

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